UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Federico Mayor

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the ceremony to confer the degree of Doctor honoris causa
of the University of Bucharest

Bucharest, 4 May 1992
Distinguished Rectors,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I begin by saying how much I feel at home here. The university environment is one that is familiar to me, since I worked in it for many years, seeking to convince society that knowledge had to be shared. That sharing shows us the way to salvation, offering the possibility of conciliation and reconciliation. If we are prepared to share, we shall gradually be able to reduce the gap which separates peoples and establish contacts between the different cultures and ethnic groups.

A university is the critical conscience of society, and for it to play this part to the full, it must first of all apply its critical awareness to itself. In particular, it must have the courage to change, however unpopular, however difficult, indeed however agonizing this may be. We cannot expect the university to be credible if it does not begin by analysing itself.

Before speaking to you in somewhat greater detail about some of the immense tasks that lie before the university, allow me, Rector, to pay tribute to the memory of those who are not with us, those who struggled and fought for the freedom and dignity of the Romanian people and to whom I wish to pay homage.

Jean Rostand, the great biologist and still greater humanist, said 'If you refuse to take action until you have assembled all the facts, you will do nothing'. How much I share that view! You have to recognize the urgency of a situation, as medical staff do, out of necessity. The doctor knows that if he delays his diagnosis until he has all the information he would like to have, he will endanger the life of the sick child who has just been brought to him. You have to recognize the urgency of the situation by evaluating the risks involved, and we would be well advised to do this today, for example, regarding the environment. If we wait too long and try for over-sophisticated solutions, planet Earth will be irreversibly condemned. Today we must recognize the need for that balanced assessment of the urgency of the situation, that ability to choose the time to take action, without haste and without prevarication, taking reasonable measure of knowledge and uncertainty. We cannot ignore the need for that today, when the acceleration of history has swept our familiar landmarks away, pushing our adaptability to its limits and filling us with both hope and dismay. We are living at a time of great opportunities. The university must be able to grasp them, without being either presumptuous or pusillanimous, if it is to remain worthy of its calling and contribute to the shaping of the future.

Rector,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to express my profound gratitude on this day when you are honouring me by the conferral of the degree of Doctor honoris causa.
I am well aware that this distinction is a tribute paid, beyond my own person, to the Organization of which I am the head and to the ideals that it embodies, and I am encouraged to see it as a further bond between Romania and UNESCO.

I know that you are well aware of the first 'emergency' about which I should like to speak, as your distinguished University is re-emerging after a long period of isolation. I have already referred to the sharing of knowledge, and at international level this implies the development of inter-university co-operation. UNESCO has always sought to foster contacts between universities through joint research, the exchange of teaching staff, researchers and students, the establishment of networks of institutions or programmes, or the pooling of resources for particular projects. Today, with the sudden change in geopolitical groupings and the accentuation of North-South imbalances, UNESCO, is redoubling its efforts to encourage the development of new ways of transferring knowledge.

It has launched the UNITWIN project and its associated UNESCO chairs programme. Within the framework of UNITWIN, the European universities network aims to permit more systematic co-operation between establishments of higher education in all the countries of Europe. I know that the University of Bucharest has signed co-operation agreements with many universities in Europe and other continents. In developing all kinds of inter-university partnership and exchange, you can count on the assistance of UNESCO, working particularly through CEPES, with which you are familiar. I am pleased to say that one UNESCO chair has already been organized at the Bucharest Polytechnical Institute and that another one, devoted to the environment, is in the process of being set up at this University. Romania is thus demonstrating its vigour, its awareness of today's problems and its desire to pursue, in higher education, its age-old traditions of excellence which have given the world mathematicians like Spiru Haret and Traian Lalescu, diplomats like Nicolae Titulescu and historians like Nicolae Jorga.

Whereas scientific and technological progress demands ever greater specialization, the complex nature of the problems which have now become priority issues for the world as a whole calls for a multidisciplinary approach. This, in my opinion, represents the second 'emergency' which the university must come to grips with, because it is not yet, or at least not always, able to show the versatility and flexibility that the twenty-first century is going to require of the training of human resources. The university must offer diversified courses with different points of focus and within frameworks that are less regimented, allowing for updating and retraining. The university must at the same time offer a broader range of training options, and opportunities for transfer from one level or course to another so that it can respond rapidly to the many and varied demands of a society and a productive system which is in the full flood of change.

This new flexibility required of the university further implies that the value of degrees should be seen as relative. We should not be afraid of being iconoclasts and acknowledging the inappropriateness of some university degrees, whose value on paper is frequently only equalled by their uselessness in practice. University degrees will be, if they are not already, seen in a different light by society in the future. There is no indication that the professions of tomorrow will require a higher level of knowledge from us, but they will demand certain qualities in terms of attitudes and behaviour patterns. The young graduate will certainly have to be more adaptable, and prepared to change jobs and place of work more than once. Very clearly, the young graduate will also have to be able to work as one of a team. Personal qualities will thus count at least as much as academic qualifications.
In addition, more and more politicians seem to want to base their decisions on scientific foundations. We should be delighted that the university has this opportunity to play a new role, providing the government with the wherewithal to take fully informed decisions. Even if those in power do not ask it for its opinion, the university has the duty to make its voice heard, since it represents knowledge, which should, ideally, go hand-in-hand with power.

The university must also be an active partner in society. First of all, following what it senses to be the path of the future, it has to shape the people and society of tomorrow, men and women who will be creative, innovative and inventive. At university, young people must learn not only to learn but also, and most importantly, to do, to contribute to the running and progress of society. If graduates, who are privileged people, cannot infuse society with a spirit of adventure and creativity, who can? Higher education must thus get them used to doing this, and explain to them why it must be done.

In addition, the university is a partner in society in that it gives democratic impulses a chance to develop and shapes the democratic culture that a free society needs in order to establish, build up and anchor its legitimacy. By encouraging understanding and tolerance and organizing and contributing to the debate on great national problems, by offering courses that focus on civic duties, rights and responsibilities and peace, the university helps to clear the path for democracy. By educating citizens in the real sense of the word, that is to say men and women aware of the importance and significance of their participation in public affairs, the university is helping to give the democratic movement strength and staying-power.

There are thus many calls for urgent action and many demands involving the life of society being made of an institution traditionally devoted to knowledge, research and reflection. The university is thus going to have to undergo some radical transformations if it does not want to disappear. It is no longer devoted exclusively to knowledge, it is also a place for commitment. It is the personal commitment of its teachers and students that will enable it to overcome almost insurmountable obstacles. We should not forget that we have turned over a new page in the history of humanity, the first page of the culture of peace. We have always lived in a civilization of war. Our budgets and our social structures, provide what is necessary for that culture of war. Neither our structures nor our budgets were designed for the new culture which is now coming into being. We know the cost of war but we do not yet know the cost of peace. 'Knowing is seeing', wrote Cioran, one of Romania's illustrious sons. 'It is neither hoping nor doing.' The university, for its part, must foster all those things: knowledge, hope, action and commitment.