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Austria

Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

Note2: Authors are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in signed articles and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Austria

**Speech of Mr Sigurd Höllinger
Director General Higher Education
Federal Ministry for Science and Transport
Austria**

Director-General,
Chairman,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In convening this World Conference on Higher Education, UNESCO offers a unique platform to discuss in-depth reform of higher education systems throughout the world.

As for the Austrian higher education system the nineties have been a **decade of continuous reform**. This conference gives us the opportunity to evaluate the results achieved so far and to learn from recent successes of higher education policies.

Distinguished delegates,

Allow me to shortly outline the characteristics of the ongoing reform process of the higher education system in Austria.

The traditional system of higher education is characterized by centralization; i.e. our federal legislation and federal agencies determine the environment in which universities as state funded institutions are active.

The reform process initiated in the beginning of the 90s brought about fundamental changes in the relationship between the state and institutions of higher education. By and large, higher education is guided by the principles of **deregulation and decentralization**, and - as a consequence thereof - by the **strengthening of the management on the institutional level**, as well as by **evaluation and quality control**. In particular, when central regulation as one way of input control is given up, systematic evaluation as a means of output control gains in importance.

The Austrian parliament has full confidence in the self-governing capacity of the universities and consequently adopted legislation which gave much more authority to the universities.

By now a new legal framework regulates - I should say: deregulates - university organization and studies. The different bodies formerly entrusted with organizational tasks were much too slow to meet the needs of a rapidly changing environment - and in defining the legal basis for university education and research.

The law of 1993 provided the groundwork for the **reorganization of the internal governance structures** of the Austrian universities.

The University Studies Act of 1997 regulates the general conditions of university education in as far as access organization of studies, forms of examinations and academic degrees are concerned. It replaced a **host of previous study laws and decrees**.

However, the first experiences of universities which have fully implemented the new system of university organization show the limits of autonomy: other federal norms, especially procedures with respect to budget and personnel, designed for federal institutions in general, are not flexible enough for entities which have the constitutionally granted right for autonomous administration.

Therefore, in 1997, two universities and the Ministry have entered into negotiations with the goal to prepare the ground for a new model: "privatization" would allow them to **change their status as federal**

agencies and thus enable them to manage their affairs more efficiently. New legislation could give universities more influence in defining the status of their employees or to regulate funding independent from annual federal budgets.

1993 was marked by the establishment of a **non-university sector in tertiary education**. Institutions called Fachhochschulen offer programmes which differ from university studies as they are designed to provide students with well defined and academically sound sets of vocational skills on a tertiary level required by specific technical and service professions. The objectives of these programmes in the non-university sector are to give students an application-oriented education reflecting the most recent developments in related disciplines; providing them with the skills necessary to master the practical demands of the respective occupations. The minimum length of a Fachhochschule programme is three years.

The establishment and expansion of the Fachhochschule sector began in 1994/95, when the first ten Fachhochschul programmes started; *by 1997/98 more than 40 programmes for about 6000 students were offered*. It is the goal of the Austrian government to have 10.000 Fachhochschule-students by the year 2000; by 2005, about 25% of high school graduates who enter tertiary education should enrol in this new non-university sector.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In presenting to you the philosophy and some of the main features of the ongoing reform process in higher education in Austria, I would like to stress the Austrian commitment to the three specific goals already outlined in the invitation to this conference, namely:

- **improving the management of higher education systems;**
- **strengthening the links between higher education and the world of work and;**
- **broadening access to higher education systems based on merit and capacity.**

Other than the first two goals, which gained in importance through and in the reforms which I have just described, an open access policy has been characteristic for the Austrian university system. This policy laid the ground for the massive expansion we have faced during the last three decades.

A society can only be considered successful if it stimulates and supports the creative potential of its members: this is crucial not only for the functioning of a democratic civil society, it is also the best chance for a society to perform well in the context of global competition. Any policy should first and foremost serve the aim to improve the individual's quality of life.

We believe that the better approach to foster a society's potential is an open educational system – and broad access to higher education in particular.

There is no doubt that a rapid increase in knowledge is one of the driving forces of economic and social development. But at the same time access to this knowledge becomes crucial and new social barriers can emerge. On a national and an international level, inadequate access to knowledge could become a source for further social inequalities if no precautions were taken to stimulate dissemination of knowledge by strengthening the necessary institutions and networks.

More than ever, knowledge is short-lived and becomes easily outdated. The Declaration on Adult Learning which was adopted by representatives of governments and organizations participating in the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education in Hamburg/Germany 1997 states that *"in the knowledge-based societies that are emerging around the world, adult and continuing education have become an imperative in the community and at the workplace."*

This is a clear guideline for all institutions of higher education to prepare their graduates for lifelong learning; years after their graduation they will face completely different economic and technological conditions and will have to adapt and respond to changing environments.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the tools to cope with the challenges of globalization is **international cooperation**.

Globalization - one of today's most frequently used catch words - began substantially earlier in the areas of science and research than it did in economics. Crossing borders has always been one of the main characteristics of science.

Thus, our legislation proposes support for international cooperation in the areas of research and teaching as one of the fundamental tasks of universities. Austrian universities receive federal funding to cultivate international research relations as part of the activities they pursue in their autonomous spheres.

Furthermore, cooperation with universities abroad is promoted through a variety of different instruments: subsidized university partnerships, bilateral arrangements of the Austrian government with other countries in the form of scientific-technical agreements or cultural agreements, multilateral agreements negotiated by international organizations and, last but not least, the research and mobility programmes of the European Union.

A series of scholarships funded by the competent Ministry facilitates the exchange of students in both directions: for Austrians to study abroad at foreign universities and for students from abroad to study at Austrian universities. Furthermore, there are bilateral scholarship arrangements that exist under the auspices of cultural and other special agreements as well as a network of treaties on the academic recognition of secondary school leaving certificates, examinations and academic degrees.

International agreements and arrangements facilitate the participation of universities in activities which include:

- the exchange of university teachers;
- the exchange of students and recent graduates;
- the exchange of foreign language teachers; and
- the execution of research projects in collaboration with foreign universities or research facilities.

One of the many examples of autonomous regional cooperation of Austrian universities is the ASEAN-UNINET (Austrian-Southeast Asian University Network). More than half of all Austrian universities participate in that programme.

Another example of particularly successful regional cooperation is CEEPUS, the Central European Programme for University Studies. In a treaty signed in December 1993 in Budapest, the contracting states of Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia - which have since been joined by the Czech Republic, Romania and Croatia - agreed to collaborate in the fields of education and continuing education, especially in the spheres of inter-university mobility and academic mobility.

Distinguished delegates,

The main objective and major challenge of UNESCO's activities over the last fifty years has been and shall be the creation of a culture of peace.

The Director-General Mr Federico Mayor reminded us clearly that *"we must be prepared to pay the price of peace as we have always been prepared to pay the price of war"*. I deeply agree that investment in education, in the capacity for dialogue and understanding each other and the world, is a key contribution to sustainable development.

Thank you for your kind attention.