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Address by Nicholas Burnet,
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on the occasion of the World Conference:

“The New Dynamics of Higher Education”

New Delhi, India, 25 February 2009

The New Dynamics of Higher Education: the issues at stake for the 2009 World Conference

Nicholas Burnett, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO New Delhi, India, 25 February 2009

I am honoured to be here today for this sub-regional conference on higher education taking place in a country that has always placed such high value on intellectual scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the Ministry of Human Resource Development of the Government of India for its instrumental support in organizing this conference. Gathering eminent specialists, it offers the opportunity to share our experiences, concerns and perspectives as we prepare for the World Conference on Higher Education in Paris next July.

If we were to take a map of the world to show the countries represented here today, we would traverse a vast stretch of territory that has been shaped by ancient civilizations, rich cultural exchanges and complex economic and social forces. These countries are geographically diverse, several are highly populated with large youth populations; others are experiencing conflict and post-conflict situations; while those in Central Asia are in an ongoing process of democratization and transition towards a market economy. All are affected by the process of globalization and its implications for the creation and sharing of knowledge.

Higher education is affected by a range of political, social and economic factors but it is equally an influential actor with the capacity to anticipate change, to innovate and to benefit human development. It is increasingly strategic – for national and regional development, for finding solutions to some of today's leading social, economic, health and environmental challenges and also, for achieving education for all. Indeed, higher education can be used to drive change throughout the education system.

As such, any reflection about the challenges facing higher education is also one about the type of society we want. For UNESCO, and indeed for the whole UN family, it is a society that promotes peace, democracy, human rights, social justice, gender equality and a shared sense of responsibility for our future. It is a society that seeks to reduce poverty, to improve nutrition and health, to expand access to education. As the Indian scholar and Nobel economics laureate Amartya Sen has taught us, development is about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. Knowledge is a key to making these opportunities accessible throughout life.

Because learning happens throughout life, no level of education can be considered in isolation. Access, equity and quality are challenges facing each one. The starting premise is that education must first and foremost serve all because it is a human right and a development imperative. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes that “everyone has the right to education” and that “higher education shall be accessible to all, on the basis of merit.” This Declaration and others that have followed are

powerful instruments because they represent binding commitments for governments.

And yet, access to learning remains highly uneven. Worldwide, 75 million children of primary school age are still out of school; close to one quarter of them are in South and West Asia. In this same region, 390 million adults lack basic literacy skills and over three million children die before reaching age 5. Well-established university systems in several countries of the region exist alongside high illiteracy and deep poverty. We cannot build prosperous societies on such unequal foundations. These inequalities are a source of deep social and economic polarization. More equitable, inclusive systems promote social cohesion through learning opportunities at all levels, in formal and non-formal settings.

Our world conference next July is built around what we are calling the “New Dynamics of Higher Education.” These new dynamics are profoundly transforming the landscape of higher education. Let me draw attention to six of them: demand, diversification, networking, lifelong learning, ICTs and social responsibility.

First the dynamic of rising demand. Worldwide there has been an almost 50 percent increase in enrolment at the tertiary level since the turn of the century. In South and West Asia, enrolment in tertiary education nearly tripled from 6.3 million students in 1991 to 17.3 million students in 2006, in Central Asia from 1.8 to 2 million. Tertiary enrolments are close to 11% in South and West Asia and 25% in Central Asia. All forecasts suggest that demand will continue to grow. It is now commonplace to say that participation rates of 40 to 50 percent in higher education are considered vital to economic growth.

Clearly not all countries and within countries, not all social groups, are benefiting from this expansion. All our regional conferences have asked how higher education can become more accessible to cultural and linguistic minorities, to indigenous groups, to those living with disabilities or residing in remote areas? Migration trends, combined with increasing student mobility – expected to triple by 2025 – will further accentuate the diversity of student populations, calling for policies that promote access to learning and academic programmes and staff that respect cultural and linguistic diversity. Several countries have established quota systems, scholarships and special secondary schools to help students from disadvantaged groups prepare for admission to universities. So addressing demand with a concern for equity and inclusion is a first challenge.

Diversification is the second dynamic at work. It has been spawned by rising demand, globalization and new information technologies. More complex, competitive systems are emerging, with a variety of institutions, providers and differentiated approaches. Cross-border provision is expanding rapidly. In this context, quality assurance is essential to protect students from fraudulent and low quality providers, many of which offer costly online courses. This is an area for global collaboration. UNESCO has facilitated the establishment of six regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications that have been ratified by over 100 member states. It has developed

guidelines with OECD for quality provision in cross-border higher education. In this region, we have developed the Asia-Pacific Academic Recognition Network and a dedicated toolkit for regulating the quality of cross-border education. Several countries in Central Asia have set up structures to develop and promote national quality assurance systems. To help students make informed decisions and to protect them from misleading information, UNESCO has set up an information portal on higher education institutions that for now inventories about 30 countries.

A third dynamic is institutional cooperation and networking in research, knowledge creation and sharing. All our regional conferences have underlined the importance of regional spaces for higher education inspired by the Bologna model in Europe. The Asia Pacific region has created many forms of institutional cooperation, alliances and research networks, some engaged in socially oriented missions. These spaces have the potential to strengthen a region's knowledge base and improve regional mobility and communication among students, scholars and researchers. It is important to promote them.

A fourth dynamic is the reality of lifelong learning. Our knowledge-intensive societies call for opportunities to upgrade skills and learn new ones. Higher education systems are being challenged to become more flexible in terms of entry and exit, to recognize qualifications gained through work experience and to develop new programmes adapted to changing social and economic needs. This involves partnerships to forge closer links with the world of work and help to bridge the mismatch between supply and demand for higher-level skills. The reality of graduate unemployment, although influenced by larger economic trends, calls for a reassessment of study programs in light of future growth areas and national development needs.

A fifth dynamic at work relates to the impact of information and communication technology on all aspects of learning – distance learning, e-learning, and the growth of open universities that are making higher education more accessible, especially for working adults. India has been a pioneer in this field, with the Indira Gandhi National Open University and other mega open universities offering learning opportunities to millions of students, many from disadvantaged backgrounds. At UNESCO we have been closely associated with the open educational resources community, through which some 3,000 courses are now freely available in digital format. As the supply of technology mediated learning environments increases, it is critical that national policies are in place that cover such areas as staff training, quality assurance and more broadly, equitable access to ICTs.

Finally, the dynamic of social responsibility, a specific theme of the World Conference. Higher education plays a strategic role in training teachers and planners, in conducting pedagogical research and developing curricula. Let me remind you that just to reach universal primary education in many parts of the world, we face a large shortage of qualified teachers. More broadly, it is through universities that graduates can be equipped with the knowledge, skills and concern to address a range of social, economic

and scientific issues: the energy crisis, the impact of climate change, food insecurity, health and the search for sustainable alternatives in all economic sectors. It is interesting to note that the United Nations is seeking to better connect with higher education institutions through its new Academic Impact programme. One of the aims is to promote their engagement in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. As you know, these goals were adopted by over 180 countries in 2000 and aim to halve the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. Universities can contribute to these goals through, for example, research on agricultural development or effective literacy programmes, teacher training, the renewal of curricula to integrate the values of sustainable development, and the promotion of women in science and technology.

Governments today face tough policy choices. They are under enormous pressure to expand provision at all levels of the education system. The financial crisis and economic slowdown run the risk of putting even more pressure on education systems, through stagnation or cutbacks in national spending, through students' reduced abilities to pay, and through lower levels of aid. In several countries represented here today, public spending on higher education declined between 1999 and 2006. Higher student fees, reforms in student loans, the privatization of higher education and international commerce in education could deepen inequalities in terms of access to learning opportunities. Although the state plays different roles in higher education – as a provider, protector, regulator or advisor – it has an overriding responsibility to promote inclusion, to ensure quality and to support research that is responsive to societal needs.

Higher education systems cannot prosper without the sharing of knowledge. We facilitate this collaboration through our UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN networks, through capacity building, support for research and close working ties with governments, universities and non-governmental organizations in all regions. I am confident that Mr Gwang- Jo Kim, the recently appointed director of our Asia-Pacific Bureau for Education based in Bangkok, will continue to stimulate this cooperation. As a former deputy minister of education of the Republic of Korea, he brings with him extensive national and international expertise in the field of educational reform.

At our World Conference next July, we aim to agree on concrete actions to ensure that higher education plays a strategic role in knowledge creation and sharing for a more sustainable future. UNESCO will also continue to argue that higher education should be accessible in every country to every individual on the basis of merit. Being strategic is all the more important in the context of today's economic and financial crisis. I trust that our discussions over the next two days and the presence of eminent experts will enrich our understanding of the challenges facing higher education in South, South-West and Central Asia, and recommend specific strategies to make these systems a positive and dynamic agent of change in every society.

Thank you very much.