

**Address by the President of the Republic of Slovenia, Dr Danilo Türk, at the UNESCO
World Conference on Higher Education 2009**

Paris, 5 July 2009

Distinguished Director-General of UNESCO Mr Koichiro Matsuura,
Fellow invited speakers,
Distinguished ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives a great pleasure to be able to speak at the conference on higher education here at UNESCO and to speak not only as President of a country, a member state of UNESCO, but also as a former professor, professor of international law at the University of Ljubljana. As you can very well imagine I have been doing a great deal of thinking about higher education, its importance and its relevance today. And I think it doesn't take too much effort to realise that higher education has throughout history been the breeding ground of ideas and knowledge, and therefore a critical agent in the generation of development. If one looks at the human history in a longer-term perspective it is equally easy to discover that creation of universities and other institutions of higher learning has probably been the most important achievement in human development of the entire humankind.

If one thinks about the institutions of higher learning today and the requirements for their success and their contribution to human development, then obviously there are a number of factors which influence their achievement and which helped in the process. I decided to speak in particular about three areas, which need to be involved in every reflection on the importance of higher education in the context of development. The first among them is academic freedom, the second is academic quality and excellence and the third is the academic contribution to international dialogue, to dialogue among civilizations. Let me briefly refer to all these three elements.

It is important to understand that institutions of higher learning are places, where at the same time we find methodological rigour, hard work and discipline, but also informality and even eccentricity. Without that combination it is impossible to expect creative inputs, and without

that it is impossible to think about such institutions. So freedom is the essence of these institutions. Freedom means primarily the freedom and autonomy of institutions themselves, freedom of research, teaching and artistic expression and openness to dialogue. These are all elements of academic freedom. But then, as in every case of freedom, one often asks what is the freedom from and what is the freedom for? Obviously, academic freedom is freedom from unwarranted outside interference in academic work. But one also has to ask the question what is the freedom for. There obviously one can find many answers, because academic institutions are developed for a variety of purposes. But there is one overarching reason why academic freedom is so important and that is to ensure quality and relevance of academic institutions, universities and other institutions of higher learning.

Now, in the quest for relevance and quality one has to think again about many factors, which influence the institutional development. Obviously one has to be realistic, because there is no substitute for human talent and human genius, but on the other hand it is important to create an environment, to create conditions, which are propitious for the exercise of human talent and for flourishing of human genius. Therefore, institutions of higher learning and governments have to invest in quality. It is an illusion to believe that quality of higher learning will come as an automatic result of market forces or as a result of competition among institutions of higher learning. There has to be a determined process, determined policy, conducted both by the institutions themselves and the governments in question.

One has to see how does the progress in quality work. In the material prepared for this conference I found a very interesting report of one of the regional conferences. The conference conducted in Macao in China in September 2008, paid a great deal of attention to quality of higher education in the Asian-Pacific region. An important and interesting element that I discovered is about the fact that while there has always been an attention paid to the question of quality, there has been at the same time in the recent year a clear movement from stage one to stage two. At stage one the focus was on the process, institutions that were there to improve quality. Now the development has reached the point at which one can already speak about standards of quality, which are comparable and which are sufficiently precise and sufficiently well developed to allow comparison among various institutions in this entire vast and diverse region. This is important and I think that this conference could make a major contribution if it focused on the question of the experience, which is gained in different parts of the world to improve quality as the overarching purpose of academic freedom.

Now, the Secretary-General of OECD has earlier at this meeting spoken about the need to link quality and relevance and reminded us that sometimes criteria for the highest quality are somewhat reductionist. It is very important I admit that publication and quotation remain among the most important criteria for quality measurement. But they are not alone. They have to be linked to other criteria and in particular they have to be linked clearly to purposes for which quality is measured. So I think this conference has an interesting task ahead of it - a task to compare experiences, which exist, and to see how quality of higher education can be improved globally.

My third point relates to the purpose of academic life and academic experience in the intercultural dialogue in global affairs. Here I would like to proceed from an experience of Europe. Europe has been traditionally a place, which was relatively open to intellectual exchange. Obviously there were barriers, national frontiers and later on ideological barriers. But they were never absolute and they never prevented academic communication across frontiers. Europe nowadays finds itself in a situation in which it is investing a great deal of effort in the creation of what is called the "single intellectual space" which is also a single research area, a research area which would be much more integrated than is the case now. One of the reasons why this needs to be done is not only related to freedom of communication in the academic sphere but also in the need to strengthen its research capacity. Europe has too few researchers. In the past decades research work has not been rewarded as it should be. That was the era of quick profit globally and hard work which is involved in academic life, and research work has been rewarded too poorly. The rewards have not been there, prestige has not been adequate. Now, at a time when we are looking towards new challenges of the 21st century, it is becoming increasingly clear that the humankind has to rely on results of well-organised research work. And that is something that Europe understands very well. Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner earlier on spoke about a variety of projects that exist in Europe to strengthen its research and general academic capacity and also about the projects which link Europe as a relatively affluent part of the world with other regions of the world. All this is very positive and has to be put high on the agenda, not only in Europe but elsewhere as well.

But all this will only work if we find proper methods and frameworks for global cooperation, which brings me back to UNESCO as a very powerful convening force for global exchange of

experience in these important matters. Academic freedom and academic exchange has to serve a purpose of global communication and better communication among civilisations. Many centuries ago Europe benefited from the fact that the traditions of Greek science and philosophy were made part of European heritage via great scholars from the Arab world. Now let us think about this historic fact and let us think about what it entails today. Hasn't the time come for Europe to be even more active, even more engaged in a dialogue with that part of the world, with the Islamic and Arab world, in strengthening academic work and in strengthening dialogue, which would help us all?

This, obviously, is an example only, an example of the magnitude of tasks which we can think about at this conference. But when we are doing this we should never forget an even more fundamental need of our time and that is to ensure higher education and education in general to the entire humankind. Director-General Matsuura has spoken in his introductory address about his concerns with regard to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. Let us not forget, the Millennium Development Goals were formulated as a crystallisation of a very long process of international discussion of what development means today. Now, at the time of crisis, those Development Goals are under threat and we need a determined effort to figure out what is realistic and how far we can come in the period between now and the year 2015.

So, distinguished delegates, I'm looking forward to your work, I'm looking forward to your results and I'm saying, together with you, that this conference addresses one of the critical issues of global development today. It is at the same time an opportunity for discussion of other specific, sometimes even technical experience, related to academic excellence and quality, but it also has to deal with the most ambitious and the most fundamental objective of our time, that is to ensure the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. I thank you.