HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE GRAND-SCALE CHALLENGES
OF THE 21ST CENTURY

STATEMENT
BY
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OPENING SESSION OF 2009 WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER
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Director General of UNESCO
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good evening!

The preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO states: "that since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". The Constitution of UNESCO was adopted in London in November 1945. It was drafted in the aftermath of the Second World War. However, this message is as relevant today as it was some sixty years ago. The 21st century is faced with grand-scale challenges whose solutions could be found in the minds of men if global catastrophies of awesome consequences are going to be avoided. The holding of the 2009 Conference on Higher Education is, therefore, timely and
opportune. The Conference offers us all a moment to reflect on some of the global challenges and define ways of unlocking new possibilities for addressing such challenges. In my view some of these global challenges could be addressed by our institutions of higher learning through integrated scholarship.

My address to the opening Session of the 2009 UNESCO Conference on Higher Education focuses on the grand-scale challenges facing the 21st century. The 21st century is a critical epoch for humanity. James Martin, the founder of the James Martin 21st Century School at the University of Oxford, identified fifteen large-scale problems of the 21st century. These are: global warming; excessive population growth; water shortages; destruction of life in the Oceans; mass famine; spread of deserts; pandemics; extreme poverty; growth of shantytowns; unstoppable global migrations; non-state actors with extreme weapons; violent religious extremism; runaway computer intelligence; nuclear and biological weapons; scientific experiments which are a risk to Homo Sapiens' existence. Martin Cleavey noted: "A global cocktail of intolerable poverty and outrageous wealth, starvation, mass terrorism with nuclear/biological weapons, world war, deliberate pandemics and religious insanity, might plunge humanity into a worldwide pattern of unending hatred and violence-a new Dark Age." This Conference should find
answers to the question: How could Higher Education respond to the large-scale problems of the 21st century?

Martin in his ground-breaking book, titled, *The Meaning of the 21st Century: A Vital Blue Print for Ensuring Our Future*, observed that mega global problems are high-momentum trends. They could be predicted and studied. Alternative directions could be devised in order to influence such trends for the better of human kind. He suggested that for each momentum trend there is a leverage factor. A leverage factor is a small but politically achievable action which can produce powerful results.

In my view the role of Higher Education is to search for leverage factors which could mitigate the impact of mega global problems on the well-being of humanity. For example, how could clean energy be leveraged to mitigate run-away climate change? Some talk about the development of a hydrogen economy. How could this be achieved? Researches in nanotechnology, biotechnology, regenerative medicine, and robotics, are demonstrating the power of knowledge in unlocking extraordinary new technologies. In addition, the full exploitation of communication technology through extreme band-width networks development shall further revolutionise the ICT.
What is required now is the development of a great education, an education which is geared to put new techniques of knowledge to work for the public good. Good education encompasses responsible research, excellent scholarship and accountable leadership. This means that the new dynamics of Higher Education and research is the identification of trends with unstoppable momentum and control them by the application of the leverage factors in order to create what James Martin calls the "eco-affluence" - that is the building of a civilization which does not use more resources than the environment can provide. Our lifestyles should be built on the quality of life that heals rather than harm our global ecosystem. Higher Education in the 21st century should enhance knowledge which brings extraordinary levels of eco-affluent creativity. New wealth and growth shall largely depend on intellect, hence the importance of higher education.

We all know that today many of the momentum trends could not be addressed effectively because of vested interests which are fixated on short-term benefits rather than on the desire to solve mega global problems. To overcome such self centered short-sightedness, our centres of knowledge should inculcate high standards of values and ethics. They should develop new leaders who are guided in their decision making by a moral compass rather than short - term gains. New leaders emerging out of our centres of learning should be responsible, honourable
and noble. They should be able to distinguish what is potentially good and potentially evil. They will be what Martin calls "The Transition Generation". The Transition Generation shall lead the 21st Century Revolution, that is the movement which will gain control of the mega global problems so that they do not destroy humanity. This is the only way we can avoid a slide into a New Dark Age!

Ladies and gentlemen, I may have painted a bleak picture of our future. What I meant to do is to make a wake up call to the leaders of Higher Education in order for them to move out the 20th century slumber and wake up to the 21st century challenges.

I thank you for your attention!