

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF Mr. KAPIL SIBAL,
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OF INDIA AT THE PLENARY SESSION III OF THE WORLD CONFERENCE ON
HIGHER EDUCATION**

(8th JULY, 2009)

Panel: Beyond Talk: What Action for Higher Education and Research

Chairman, Mr. Abdul Waheed Khan, ADG, UNESCO

Mr. Fernando Haddad, Minister of Education, Brazil

Delegates to the WCHE,

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. I feel privileged to deliver this keynote address in this august forum. For the last three days, participants of this World Conference on Higher Education have been deliberating on emerging new dynamics in the sector of higher education and have been taking a critical look at the role of higher education in meeting global challenges from poverty eradication to sustainable development. We are also meeting here to understand and analyse the important role which Higher Education will play in enabling global economies to emerge successfully from the financial crisis, which has affected most parts of the world. As we are all aware, the sector of higher education has witnessed profound changes in the last one decade, particularly since the last UNESCO world conference on higher education took place in 1998 and Higher Education is now increasingly seen as an engine of economic development. In my view, there are three historic realities which impact the need for investments in quality higher education around the world.

2. First amongst them is the reality of global economies being truly interdependent and becoming increasingly integrated as exemplified by cross-border

manufacturing processes. The interdependence of global economies has also led to situations where the impact of change in one region or country is increasingly felt all over the world. Cross border manufacturing processes and global transactions in services sector have created a demand for higher education not only of “national quality” but also which helps further this process of globalized economy.

3. A second important development has been the tremendous advancement in technology particularly the development of information and communication technology which has transformed the nature of delivery systems in higher education and has allowed sharing of intellectual inputs and knowledge in a manner, where knowledge can be accessed at the click of a button almost at the doorstep of the student. This technological revolution has also opened the doors of cross border education particularly in distance mode, with possibilities of virtual universities providing quality education at reasonable costs.

4. A third important development affecting our globe is the awareness and the need for action on global warming and climate change. Education, particularly higher education, must inculcate the values of sustainable development in the minds of our youth.

5. In the above global perspective, there has been a huge expansion of higher education sector - rather we can even term it as an ‘explosion’ of increased opportunities in higher education. There are an estimated 152.5 million students worldwide in 2007 in the tertiary sector, which is nearly 50% increase compared to 2000. Globally, the percentage of university aged young people enrolled in tertiary education has increased from 19% in 2000 to 26% in 2007. According to the 2009 Global Education Digest published by UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics, since 2000 an additional 51.7 million new tertiary students have enrolled around the world and 2.8 million students currently study outside their home country. However, we must appreciate that the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education ranges from 70% in North America and Western Europe and 11% in South and West Asia to mere 6% in Africa. Within the countries too, there are groups who cannot have access to education due to various factors related to socio-economic status, low incomes, gender or disabilities. Thus, there is a tremendous need to improve access to higher education in developing countries.

6. Another important point to consider here is the demographic change which is occurring around the world. While most of the developed countries of the world other than USA are facing aging problems with very adverse dependency ratios, many developing countries having demographic dividend will be providing human resources to others. In this situation it is also in the interest of the developed countries to come forward and partner with the countries having demographic advantage (which are mostly developing countries) so that different countries of the world can share their strengths to develop the world, and I think education, particularly higher education, is the field to do so. I would, in fact, advocate for a global strategy to meet the requirements of skilled manpower for the world and certainly UNESCO can play an important role in the same.

7. Some important initiatives would include taking educational institutions to the doorsteps of the students through cross border education so that students can access knowledge outside their national boundaries. A second and perhaps even more important initiative would be the use of information and communication technology in higher education.

8. The implications of new and more diverse modes of delivery based on ICTs including e-learning, open educational resources and mobile technologies needs to be understood and harnessed for the betterment of all. The immense possibilities of the new technologies for promoting trans-national education cannot be underestimated. The ICT revolution worldwide has facilitated ready access to wide information and diverse knowledge. It is therefore, important that our Universities and Colleges develop a system of knowledge management to reap the benefits of information technology. In this context, I congratulate UNESCO for partnering with UNESCO for development of Education through ICT.

9. The globalisation of higher education has added newer challenges in terms of quality assurance system, issues of mutual recognition and equivalence of degrees and transparency in the regulatory structures of national systems of higher education. These challenges can be largely addressed by increased regional and international collaboration. We may also undertake joint assessment projects to increase the comparability of evaluation activities of quality assurance and accreditation bodies. Quality Assurance Systems should encourage effective

learning processes which are adapted to the needs of various categories of learners. The systems should encompass not merely conventional programmes in higher education but also the borderless, private and continuing education.

10. It is also desirable that the higher education providers delivering cross border education should ensure that the programmes that are delivered across the borders and in their home country are of comparable quality and they also take in account the cultural and linguistic sensitivities of the receiving countries. While we recognise the tremendous potential of cross border education, we have to be mindful of the risks involved regarding the entry of 'diploma mills' and unscrupulous for – profit providers.

11. As countries recognise the critical role that education has in building skilled manpower for economic growth and strive towards expansion of higher education, there is a tremendous strain on public resources. The public institutions cannot keep pace with the rising demand and are being forced to look at alternative options besides public funding. The importance of private sector in making investments in higher education needs to be realised. The huge gaps in access to higher education between regions and countries need to be narrowed but this is not possible without participation of private sector investments.

12. While the increased demand for higher education, particularly in developing countries, has led to massive investments by private sector, it has also raised issues as to how to regulate the role of private sector in higher education and research. There is also a challenge of fostering balanced growth and promotion of all disciplines in the context of market driven demand for professional skills / disciplines only. There is also a challenge as to whether the larger role of private sector will lead to more applied research driven by the immediate needs of the industry and whether basic research will suffer as a consequence of lack of funding or resources? Increasing cross border education has also made it important to have networks of equivalence of degrees and diplomas as also the need to ensure the quality of education imparted by foreign providers is of high quality and there is no scope for 'degree mills' to operate. This is again an area where we all, particularly UNESCO, could play an important role in helping Member States develop national standards of accreditation for different purposes for bench-marking higher education

as also help in improving/maintaining the quality of education so that private players do not become 'teaching sweat-shops'.

13. I need hardly emphasize the important role which industry will play in higher education and research. The linkage between learning, research and innovation within higher education is the key to building of sustainable knowledge societies. There is a need to look at the type of research that is being promoted as well as the adequacy of human and financial resources required for cutting edge research that is relevant to the needs of countries and regions. Therefore, while there is a need for public funded research in basic sciences and frontier areas of technology like Nano Science, Bio-Science, etc. the importance of linkages with the industry, particularly private sector, for funding innovation and technological developments needs to be encouraged. There is also a need for regional and global partnership for research.

14. As we all know, there are large variations in the higher education system across the countries as also within the countries. Therefore, 'one size fits all' solutions would not work and each one of us has to think and develop strategies depending on the national & regional requirements. The three major issues of higher education in today's world, namely access equity and quality need to be addressed in a holistic manner to ensure that our systems of higher education and research not only contribute to the development of the nation but also to the world by creation of a knowledge society, with values of sustainability, peace and development. I am sure UNESCO will continue to play its key role of 'action with a vision' and the 'purpose to serve the future of the mankind'. With these words I thank the UNESCO and look forward to a very fruitful interaction with you all.

Thank you