A Catalyst for Innovative and Sustainable Societies:

The International Association of Universities celebrating 100 years Higher Education in Thailand Bangkok November 2016

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Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.
– Nelson Mandela.

What is the role of higher education in creating sustainable communities? Just one year after the official implementation of the ASEAN accord leading to regional connectivity and cooperation in all fields of social development, a Consortium of Thai Universities joining the organizing committee of the International Association of Universities could invite the world academic community to share their visions and experiences in a three day conference hosted by Chulalongkorn University on November 14 - 16, 2016.

The challenging theme was designed to invite the academic community to respond to the overall universal challenge of the new Global Development Agenda (2016 - 2030) and its hopes to mobilize all sectors of society to join forces in a concerted action to realize the 17 sustainable development goals. The Inchon Declara-

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tion for Education 2030, entrusting UNESCO with the leadership, was instrumental in shaping the development goals for the education sector with the overall aim to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

The Global Education Monitoring Report was introduced at the opening plenary session by its Director Aaron Benavot, setting the stage for later presentations and discussions in the following special sessions. He first referred to the 17 goals embracing 160 targets in the Agenda that had been adopted by the UN in 2015 and to be achieved by 2030.

The report points to four areas where education is needed to reach the Agenda's goals:
• Prosperity - promoting sustainable and inclusive economies
• People - promoting inclusive social development
• Peace - promoting political participation, peace and access to justice
• Place - promoting sustainable cities and human settlements
• Partnerships - enabling conditions to achieve the SDG goals

Right from the opening ceremony dedicated to the loving memory of His Royal Majesty King Bhumipol the Great, the goal of reaching sustainability through following the guiding principles of a Sufficiency Economy introduced by His Majesty and followed up in practice by the Royal Farms was introduced by our Thai colleagues.

Stressing the need for a two pronged educational approach Angelo Riccaboni, Rector of the University of Siena, emphasized building awareness among the population at large,encouraging interaction and partnership building with a responsible leadership. Michael Gaebel, Director of the Higher Education Policy Unit of the European University Organization, with 850 members in 48 European countries followed up by pointing to the new phase(2015 - 2019) of the Bologna Process responding to the challenges of increased immigration by implementing a program of social inclusion, especially among young people from migrant backgrounds (the EU SHARE program).

Anticipating the future implementation of an open border policy within ASEAN that would allow free flow of qualified labor resources Antana Gajaseni, Executive Director of the Asian University Network organizing 7,788 higher education institutions serving a population of 625 million discussed the much needed preparations for a system of regional educational integration that would include an interregional harmonization of quality assurance, a common credit system and degree recognition.

Representing Higher Education in the Arab world Mahmoud Nili Ahmadabad, President of the University of Teheran with a student population of 60,000 in his presentation "Universities and Community Development" introduced as three goals for universities to become drivers for development: Education-Research-

Community Service and as educational development goals: Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Self Management, Collaboration. Sultan T. Abu-Orafi, Secretary General of the Association of Arab Universities with a membership of 800 institutions for higher learning pointed to the often forgotten heritage of Arab higher education and scientific research in areas like mathematics, astronomy, music, all dating as far back as to the eight century and laying the foundation for these and other disciplines in university education and research in Europe.

In the middle of discussing a number of positive recommendations and models for future work the participants were brought back to face the present dwindling status of universities in society presented in the Tuesdays plenary session by Yongmin Kim, President of the Pahang University of Science and Technology in Korea. In his address "Mission of a University in the 21st Century" he pointed to one of wordings of the definitions of Academic in the Free Dictionary: "Having no practical purpose or use." The decline of public support and trust should be a warning sign to give real meaning to the concepts of interdisiplinarity and collaboration in teaching and research in order to reach the main goal of constituting and improving the quality of peoples lives around the globe. All what we value for its impact on modern life has been the result of combined efforts by the scientific community, Basic research, according to the speaker, must be brought out of the "valley of death" where it now resides so as to become Transitional research in line with the objects of the conference. It would require the ability to handle futures, recognizing opportunities, taking risks and promoting innovation.

Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Director for the Centre for Postgraduate Studies and Chair of Environmental Education at Rhodes University, South Africa follow suit by ushering in Transformative learning through Transformative research, transgressing the split between a natural science and a social science perspective, pointing to innovative networks like SCIN and SARVA working for the de-colonization of research and bringing it into a radical co-presence with learning Brad Farnsworth, Vice President of the American Council on Education likewise presented an urgent call for the building of Partnership and Innovation networks

Given the overwhelming majority of participants representing the natural and social sciences, a full and comprehensive exploration of the conference call for innovation in research could however not be expected. In today's academic climate the meditative role of the humanistic disciplines is seen to be dwindling to the detriment of an equally comprehensive discussion of primary values so urgently needed and as called for by The Magna Charta Observatory of Fundamental Values and Rights at a post-conference meeting.

The initiative for coordinating a more holistic approach in the exploration of common values will rest with UNESCO that has formulated similar aims for the coming decade (UNESCO. Rethinking Education, 2014) Victoria W. Thoresen, the UNESCO Chair for Education about Sustainable Lifestyles and Director of PERL (Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living) pointed to the necessity of new approaches to Transformational learning that must include emo-

tional involvement toward motivation for community service. As advocated by the arts communities and supported by recent research, this motivation rests on sensual and affective stimulation as represented by the LOLA methodology (Active Learning with Images and Objects) and the role that music has been proven to play in fostering personal and community integration.

Figure 1. Victoria W. Thoresen, the UNESCO Chair for Education about Sustainable Lifestyles.

It has been the constant aim of our Journal as well as the annual Urban Research Plaza Forum meetings to invite and join our partners across the globe and across all disciplines in a renewed effort to become agents for change and our institutions and organizations to become catalysts for innovative and sustainable societies.