Welcoming Remarks
By Mr. S. B. Dissanayake, Hon Minister of Higher Education, Ministry of Higher Education, Sri Lanka

Hon Nandimithra Ekanayake, Deputy Minister of Higher Education,
Mr. Gwang-Jo Kim, Director, UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, Bangkok, Thailand
Dr. Sunil Jayantha Navaratna, Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education
Prof. Kshanika Hirimburegama, Chairperson, University Grants Commission
Mr. Libing Wang, Senior Programme Specialist in Higher Education, UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, Bangkok, Thailand
Mr. Scott J. Evans, Branch Manager, Europe, Americas and Multilateral Branch, International Group, Australian Government Department of Education
Prof Ananda Jayawardena, Chairman CVCD
Mr P Ranepura, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education

Vice chancellors, deans, professors and other academics, representatives from various government agencies and especially the foreign delegates representing 35 nations, I warmly welcome all of you on behalf of my government, the Ministry of Higher Education and University Grants Commission.

I am delighted to be here this morning. It is a very important day for my ministry. We are very happy to host the 13th Session of the Regional Committee on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific and the Regional Workshop on Quality Assurance in Higher Education. I very warmly and sincerely welcome all the foreign delegates and my friends from the Sri Lankan higher education sector, as well as the other government agencies and media organizations.

Today, Sri Lanka is moving forward in an unprecedented manner. The strategic mandate of our government - *Mahinda Chinthana way forward* - the national vision of Sri Lanka, envisions Sri Lanka as the Miracle of Asia. Under this long-term vision, we are going to create and maintain six hubs, namely: Aviation, Naval, Energy, Business, Tourism and Knowledge Hubs. The knowledge hub is at the center of the other five hubs.

Higher education has to play a pivotal role in developing the knowledge hub. Higher education in Sri Lanka is undergoing many developments. We try to give a new force and strength to higher education in this country. The long-term vision of the Ministry of Higher Education is to “be an international hub of excellence in higher education by 2020”. I am not going to talk about all these new developments. In our national higher education strategic management plan, we have identified 12 goals. I would like to draw your attention to one of them: “improved global compatibility, global links and exchanges”. This conference is directly related to that goal. Recognition of qualifications in higher education in Asia and the Pacific would help us to achieve this goal. I hope that today’s deliberations and learning from each other will help us move forward strongly. We are very happy and proud to be able to host this 13th Session.

One other important goal is improved employability and quality of graduates. I am very happy that the Regional Workshop on Quality Assurance in Higher Education is also happening in conjunction with the 13th
Session. We in Asia and Pacific can learn a lot from each other. Quality is of paramount importance to us. We must produce graduates who are employable - graduates who can meaningfully contribute to the nation’s development.

When we talk about quality assurance, we should not look at it as ensuring some checks and balances. Quality assurance and accreditation is the way to improve what we do. It allows us to ask ourselves some critical questions about what we do and how we teach and learn. Today, education is a global paradigm. We produce graduates for the global market. As such, it is very important that we follow global standards.

Quality and recognition of qualifications across nations are also important in attracting foreign students and professors to a country. Sri Lanka envisions making higher education one of our major foreign income earners. Our taglines in developing higher education are: world-class universities; globally-employable graduates; and entrepreneurial graduates - the job creators, not the job seekers. I have no doubt that the experience my friends in higher education in Sri Lanka will gain from this process would definitely help us achieve all of these objectives.

We know about UNESCO’s emphasis on and involvement with quality education. I like one of your taglines - “putting quality education at the heart of development”. This has a very special meaning to us in Sri Lanka. We try to achieve unprecedented development and we understand the importance of education in that process. It is a blessing that UNESCO’s objectives match what we want to achieve.

UNESCO’s key focal areas in education are increasing equity and access, improving quality, and ensuring that education develops knowledge and skills in areas such as sustainable development, HIV and AIDS, human rights and gender equality. The Asia and Pacific region can benefit a lot from these.

We in Sri Lanka look forward to working very closely with UNESCO. I am very happy to meet Mr. Gwang-Jo Kim, Director, UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education based in Bangkok. Mr. Kim, I look forward to working together with you in the future as well.

We appreciate the support extended by the Australian Government for this event. Mr. Scott J. Evans, of the Australian Government Department of Education and other delegates of the Australian government, I take this opportunity to offer my sincere appreciation for your support. The Australian government is also assisting us with the Sri Lankan Qualifications Framework.

I take this opportunity to welcome Mr. Libing Wang, Senior Programme Specialist in Higher Education, UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok. Mr. Wang, together with my secretary has been the live wire behind this event. On behalf of all of us, I thank Mr. Wang and his team for all the hard work and support extended.

I would fail in my duty if I did not acknowledge all the planning and hard work by my own staff, Secretary Dr. Navaratne, Additional Secretary Mr. Ranepura and all other officers of my ministry, as well as the contributions made by the UGC and HETC project to make this event a success. It makes me very happy to see younger and junior staff taking a lead role in organizing events of this nature. I am certain that all of you will be very happy to see your hard work over many months lead to a successful conference.

Once again, I am very happy to see such a wonderful delegation. I am certain that our foreign participants will see what a wonderful country Sri Lanka is. I know that you will be getting a chance to visit Kandy or Galle on Wednesday. I have no doubt that you will go and share what you experienced with your friends and family. Together all of us can make Sri Lanka the wonder of Asia. I wish all the best for the deliberations over the next
two days and look forward to a meaningful outcome. This is only a starting point. Let’s take this great opportunity to strengthen relationships and further understanding for the betterment of higher education in the region. I wish you good luck for the two-day conference and look forward to seeing you all soon.

Ayubowan!