On behalf of the ERI-Net secretariat, I would like to congratulate the nine presenters for their informative and inspiring case study presentations on the topic of transition from secondary education to higher education. From the case study presentations, it is evident that there is considerable diversity in the driving factors, policy priorities and concerns, institutional arrangements, and subsequent reforms. While we value diversity and see it as an asset rather than an obstacle to information sharing, international cooperation and capacity building among different systems, it is also important to identify some of the key issues and commonalities from the case study reports, so that national or jurisdictional experiences can be translated into regional expertise. This will also ensure that UNESCO’s future involvement in this area can be informed by the best policies and practices of the member states in this region.

According to the research framework formulated and agreed at the expert meeting in Bangkok in March 2013, the focus of this research is on university and college admission policies and their impact on the provision of secondary education. All the case study reports adhere well to the framework and have provided rich insights into the major concerns, policy responses, and future challenges experienced in their respective national or jurisdictional contexts.

The importance of the research topic of the transition from secondary education to higher education is duly reflected in the case studies through the linkages of the admission policies to many important principles such as social inclusion, national solidarity, equity, relevance, quality, transparency and so on. University and college admission policies have also been regarded as important tools to increase the competitiveness of higher education systems and help promote cross-border student mobility, as demonstrated in the case studies of Australia and Hong Kong SAR where admission criteria for international students are well developed and implemented. With particular reference to student mobility, there are major sending and receiving countries in this region, and member states may explore the possibilities of establishing separate or integrated mechanisms for recruiting international or non-local students. In this regard, the recognition of secondary education qualifications is an important issue that could be supported through the development of a regional framework connected to the existing UNESCO-initiated Regional Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications.

Clearly, there exist significant differences in the nature of university and college admission systems among participating countries and jurisdiction. Some systems are very much
centralized with specific government authorities steering the development and implementation of the admission policies and procedures, as illustrated in the case study reports of China and Malaysia. There are also systems where universities enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy in developing their own minimum entry requirements and administering their own recruitment procedures, as can be seen in Australia, Hong Kong SAR and the Philippines. However, no rigid dichotomy between the two groups can be deciphered, as many initiatives of traditionally centralized systems like China, Republic of Korea, Thailand and Malaysia have started granting top universities more autonomy in stipulating their own admission policies. At the same time, autonomous universities in traditionally decentralized systems, such as Australia, are increasingly required to comply with admission-related national or federal regulations. The introduction of an admission officer system in the Republic of Korea is an example of greater university autonomy in recruiting students based on comprehensive assessments. In the Philippines, attempts are being made to move towards a more unified university admission system, rather than keeping each university administering its own admission system. India has recently proposed to have a common entrance system for all professional education programmes and is planning to undertake many reforms in the entrance examination system. It can be argued, therefore, that regulated institutional autonomy on admission policies is becoming a convergent trend of countries in this region.

As for the admission criteria, it is clear from the case study reports that standardized tests have been seen as the major means to select or screen students for entry into universities and colleges. As high-stake college entrance examinations (Gaokao / Center Shiken / Suneung) become more standardized, their results remain the most important criteria for university admission in China, Japan and Republic of Korea. In other countries, subject-based testing mainly takes place in the final year of secondary education and the results are reflected in secondary education diplomas and certificates (e.g. Board Examinations in India; ATAR in Australia; CGPA in Malaysia; HKDSE in Hong Kong SAR; and GPAX in Thailand). Students usually take external scholastic aptitude tests as well, which can be subject-based while focusing more on generic and higher order thinking skills (HOTS), such as critical thinking, problem solving, communicative and collaborative skills, etc. At the same time, the case studies also indicate that there are growing calls in the region for the admission process to be based on a broader set of criteria that covers not only the measurable aspect of learning, but also other components such as school records, extra-curricular activities, community engagement, and so on. The Chinese experience of introducing students’ progress portfolios based on teachers’ daily observations and records can be regarded as an example of broadening the criteria base for university admission. Similarly, in the Republic of Korea, students’ school records are integrated into the admission criteria, and in Malaysia, 10% of the total admission weights are allocated to students’ extra-curricular engagement. In Hong Kong SAR, in addition to academic requirements, personal qualities such as leadership, communicative skills, creativity, and interactivity are important parts of the admission eligibility.

The case studies indicate that social inclusion and national solidarity are among the most important objectives of university admission systems. This is especially true in countries with multicultural and heterogeneous populations. Malaysia used to have an ethnic quota system which allocated 55% of university places to Bumiputeras (Malays and indigenous
groups) and the remaining 45% to other races. This system was subsequently replaced by a **meritocracy system** in 2003. Again in **Malaysia**, starting from 2013, all higher education institutions are required to allocate 100 places out of their annual intake to students from the bottom 40% of low income families. Similarly, **India** has established a system that reserves places for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and other disadvantaged groups. In **China**, special arrangements have been made to recruit students from disadvantaged backgrounds, e.g. the latest national initiative which targets students from 832 poverty-stricken counties. In **Australia**, alternative admission arrangements have been in place to cover a wide range of disadvantaged people, including indigenous Australians and applicants from low socio-economic background. In the **Thai** system, each university sets aside a number of places for students from the provinces. Apart from the quota system, other **affirmative actions** aiming for inclusion of disadvantaged groups and marginalized people include: enhanced financial support, ear-marked scholarships, additional coaching and separate admission arrangements.

**Engaging all stakeholders** in the development of admission policies is of critical importance for the achievement of relevance, inclusiveness, quality, transparency, and preparedness of students for college life, and thus contributes to a smooth transition from secondary education to higher education. The **Republic of Korea’s commitment** to promoting and enabling collaboration and communication among three major stakeholders of high schools, colleges, and the government has been proven to be useful. In the case of **Malaysia**, public universities usually invite comments and inputs from **industry and local communities** when they develop their admission criteria. It will be valuable for other countries and systems to examine or include this important policy domain in their case study reports so that more successful experiences can be shared.

The diversification of higher education programmes in an era of higher education massification requires corresponding **diversification of secondary education programmes**, especially at the senior secondary education level, so that students with different talents and aptitudes can be well prepared to enter into different types of higher education programmes. This is another important policy domain pertinent to the smooth transition from secondary education to higher education. Diversifying admission mechanisms and developing flexible and multi-entry systems can be the key policy intervention for member states to consider. **Australia** and **India** have separate admission systems for higher professional education programmes. Efforts to diversify the provision of secondary education have already been made in the **Republic of Korea. Japan** has shifted its admission policies from knowledge-intensive screening to **mutual selection** and is planning on strengthening the **students’ career guidance system** which aims at enabling students and parents to make informed decisions when they choose their undergraduate study programmes. In the case of **Hong Kong SAR**, an increase in student advice centers and **career counseling services** has been proposed as a response to the increasing diversification of higher education programmes.

Another area that requires attention is the establishment of a **National Qualification Framework**, which can serve as a single set of progressive benchmarks in knowledge, skills, competences, values and attitudes, to connect different levels of education cohesively. It is very much hoped that the case study reports of **Malaysia** and the **Philippines** can provide
more information in this regard, as the former has already developed the Malaysia Qualification Framework (MQF) and the latter is in the process of developing Philippines Qualification Framework.

The impact of university and college admission policies on the provision of secondary education continues to be a major concern in many countries. Although substantial efforts have been made to broaden the admission criteria and diversify the admission arrangements, academic achievements remain the most important factor for university admission decisions.

One of the most pronounced consequences of this is the prevailing culture of ‘teaching to the test’ in secondary schools, which can be observed in: a shrinking of school curriculum to the core subjects while other subjects are marginalized, as indicated in the case study reports of Australia, China, India and Thailand; long school days for extra sessions and excessive loads of homework for students in China; added stress and de-motivation of students in India; increased teachers’ workload in the Republic of Korea and other countries; reluctance to adopt classroom innovations towards student-centered pedagogy and assessment, as indicated in the case study report of Australia, and so on.

The second pertinent impact is the rise of so-called shadow education in the form of private tutoring programmes and extra coaching, which has emerged as a result of intense competition for university places, especially for entry into prestigious universities and the most popular study subjects and programmes. According to a survey conducted by Malaysia, 89% of the students surveyed have attended at least one form of private tutoring programme. This phenomenon can be spotted in almost all case studies presented, and is believed to distract teachers from their normal duties at schools, add to the financial burden on parents, and even worse, exhaust students’ learning potentials.

In view of the fact that every higher education system has its own tradition and operational environment, it is understandable that there should not be ‘one size fits all’ solution to these complex and diverse issues. However, a regional conceptualization of the main policy issues concerning the transition from secondary education to higher education can provide an analytical and dynamic regional framework for member states to refer to when they develop or improve their own systems. As such, UNESCO Bangkok will remain committed to collecting and disseminating examples of innovative policies and practices in this area in the future.