UNIVERSAL NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Gwang-Chol Chang
Chief, Education Policy and Reform Unit
UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education

on the occasion of the

28-30 January, 2013
Distinguished guests, friends and colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here today to this important gathering – the Central Asia Symposium on ICT in Education (CASIE): Innovative ICT Practices on Lifelong Learning. What a pleasure to see so many familiar, warm and welcoming faces! It is indeed an honour for me to be here today because this topic, “innovative ICT practices on lifelong learning” is one I value highly. I’d like to use this opportunity, this keynote speech, to explain why in my mind, this gathering is so important.

1) Lifelong learning

“Lifelong learning” is a concept that we are all likely familiar with by now given its increasing focus and relevance in the development of education policies worldwide. But lifelong learning is itself nothing new. I’m reminded of the words of Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher who said,

“Learning is an ornament in prosperity, a refuge in adversity, and a provision in old age.”

I’m reminded also of the words of Michel de Montaigne:

“There is nothing more notable in Socrates than that he found time, when he was an old man, to learn music and dancing, and thought it time well spent.”

I’m reminded of Leonardo da Vinci:

“Learning never exhausts the mind.”

Of Gandhi:

“Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.”

And of Albert Einstein:

“Wisdom is not a product of schooling but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it.”

I would argue that the sentiments captured in this quote, “wisdom is not a product of schooling but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it” underpin our
desire to go beyond formal education and ensure each and every individual has the opportunity to learn and continue learning throughout their life. I’m sure that this basic premise is not unfamiliar to countries of Central Asia – it is a belief we all share across all corners of the globe.

For this reason, UNESCO has continued to promote a culture of lifelong learning, as reflected in the 1972 Faure Report, as reflected in its very definition of basic learning needs established at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien (Thailand), and of course, in the well-known 1996 Delors Report on the four pillars of learning.

As the Faure Report boldly stated:

“We propose lifelong education as the master concept for educational policies in the years to come for both developed and developing countries.”

The Delors’ Report extended this further, identifying learning throughout life as the very heartbeat of society and key to the twenty-first century. For the Delors Commission, lifelong learning is built upon four pillars of learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.

But lifelong learning is more than a buzzword, it’s more than rhetoric, and it is more than a nice idea sitting neatly on our bookshelves. Procedures have been developed to recognize all forms of learning and in particular, the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning. UNESCO has developed guidelines and mechanisms to assist Member States in developing such structures. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) has, for example, established the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RVA) programme, the Canadian Council on Learning also provides a wide variety of publically available tools to support progress in lifelong learning in Canada and, based on the UNESCO framework recommended by Jacques Delors, the European Lifelong Learning Index demonstrates the conditions for lifelong learning that exist across all EU member states.

And so you see, lifelong learning is really nothing new. The aspiration for lifelong learning is as old as Aristotle himself (or older!), it is treasured by our greatest visionaries and it has maintained its currency over time, today enshrined in the
institutional fabric of so many organizations including UNESCO, and the policies and plans of governments across both developed and developing countries.

2) A Changing World

But why, you may ask, is lifelong learning so important? Why do we focus so heavily on this? And, if it’s such an ancient concept, why the renewed attention to lifelong learning today?

Ladies and gentlemen, this era in which we live is an era of change to which we must all develop the skills to adapt. You may argue that the world has always existed in a constant state of flux and that change is, as they say, the only constant. But rapid globalization today and our resulting connectedness, means that the changes we experience now are both omnidirectional and occurring at a pace faster than ever before.

Let’s take the Asia-Pacific as an example. Even in the face of a global economic downturn, economies of this region have been growing at an impressive rate. In fact, according to the ADB’s Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2012, the region contributed about 36% of global GDP in 2011 while Europe, North America, and the rest of the world contributed 28%, 23%, and 14% respectively. That is 36% of global GDP! Given that the Asia-Pacific is home to 4.2 billion people or 61% of the world’s population, there is much room for this region to grow further still, dramatically changing the global economic outlook and the shape of development worldwide. That kind of unprecedented growth means significant change.

Indeed, the Asia-Pacific region has experienced significant shifts in its economic structure. Its once largely agriculture-based economies have undergone an intense process of industrialisation. Meanwhile, its high-income countries have evolved into post-industrial economies that are less reliant on industry and increasingly more dependent on the service sector. **Whether we are ready for it or not, changing economic structures are fundamentally changing livelihoods.**

Simultaneously, the opening up of borders has also facilitated greater population flows between countries. In Central Asia, for example, labour migrants contribute significantly to growing economies of two key receiving countries: Kazakhstan and Russia. International migrants in the region are also increasingly moving to new destination countries including Brunei Darussalam, Japan, Malaysia and the Republic of Korea. Worldwide, internal migration has increased dramatically with
an estimated fivefold increase in the number of people living in urban areas between 1950 and 2000. **Whether we are ready for it or not, changing migration patterns are fundamentally changing livelihoods.**

Demographic landscapes are also shifting, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. According to UN figures, 62% of the world's 15- to 24-year-olds are from this very region. A number of countries in the region are experiencing a youth bulge, where people between the ages of 15-24 make up the largest demographic segment of the population. In contrast to this, many other countries are experiencing ageing populations. It is a fact, for example, that in this very region, the share of the population over 60 years is set to double from 9.4 per cent of the total population in 2000, to 23.5 per cent by 2050. **Whether we are ready for it or not, changing demographic patterns create new social and economic pressures which are fundamentally changing livelihoods.**

Moreover, information and communication technologies have by now spread to even the deepest pockets of the world. It is interesting to consider these two graphs. The first one shows the growth in internet users and mobile phone subscribers. Between 2006 and 2008, mobile phone subscriptions rose by over 70 per cent in low-income countries alone, and internet increased by a sizeable 10 per cent. The second shows the astronomical growth in the number of websites worldwide – from virtually none in 1995, to over 200 million just 15 years later. **Whether we are ready for it or not, changing communication patterns are changing the ways we connect and thus, they are fundamentally changing our livelihoods.**

And of course, we cannot forget to mention the changes that are occurring to our natural environment. We know the impacts of global warming will only intensify and we know the onus is on us to both mitigate the threat of human-induced climate change and prepare ourselves for the inevitable changes to livelihoods that will occur.

All of this points to one very obvious conclusion – we all need the skills to adapt to change. We cannot sit idly by as economic structures, migration flows, population dynamics, technology, communication channels and our natural environments are fundamentally altered. And we cannot leave the responsibility to adapt to change in the hands of the young, the best educated, the most
affluent. In order for our societies to cope with the great number of changes that will continue to shape our communities and shape our lives as individuals, we must all develop the capacity to adapt to change, to be resilient, to be flexible, to be creative and to exploit new opportunities as they continue to arise. The key to this? The capacity for lifelong learning.

3) ICT in Education – important key to lifelong learning

So you see why lifelong learning is so important now. But why, you may ask, is lifelong learning relevant to ICT in education?

Put simply, advancements in communication technologies have expanded opportunities for access to quality education for all, not only for reaching the unreached but for enhancing lifelong and life-wide learning. These developments are challenging the limitations of conventional learning and the space and time within which learning occurs. While traditionally largely confined to educational buildings, technology has broken down barriers, opening up uncountable possibilities regarding where and how learning can take place. Learners are now presented with a plethora of choice as to what they can learn, where they can learn, when and how they would like to learn and with whom!

ICTs have led to the development of new pedagogical approaches employing technology. For example, we see increasingly diverse delivery of and pathways to learning through open source education, increased access to knowledge resources through mobile learning as well as through the development of social networking and peer learning. ICTs also open up new opportunities for education to occur in both non-formal and informal settings through vocational training centres, through in-company training and through extracurricular learning centres. ICTs provide opportunity for new types of learning modalities to cater to the great diversity of learners and a great diversity of circumstances, including part-time and modular courses. All in all, ICTs provide opportunity to enhance lifelong and life-wide learning in ways that Aristotle, Gandhi, Einstein or Da Vinci could only dream of!

But despite the transformative potential of ICTs, there is still a long way for us to go before this opportunity to enhance lifelong and life-wide learning can be fully realized in our communities. Indeed, there is much that we can do, as educationalists and as policy makers to enhance ICT-enabled teaching and
learning in our communities. And there is much already happening. Let me provide you with some examples.

4) Examples

[OER/OCW-technology]
Increasing movements towards Open Educational Resources and Open Course Wares is just one. This past spring, Harvard and MIT announced a new online education venture called edX. These “massive open online courses” (MOOCs) are now available to anyone with access to the internet. This really changes the game, as the right to a top education is no longer reserved for the elite. What a significant shift.

[Country initiatives in the region]
But we don’t have to look to West to find examples for how ICT in education is engendering a culture of lifelong learning. Japan and the Republic of Korea, for example, are raising high the flag of e-learning through the introduction of legislation, policies and plans to promote e-learning (and lifelong learning) as a means of enhancing the country’s competitive strength as a knowledge-based society. The Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand have also been able to make improvement in their own country initiatives, policies, and plans for strengthening ICT in education and in so doing, promoting a culture of lifelong learning.

[Potential in Central Asia]
Countries of Central Asia have also opened up tremendous possibilities. As we all know, the lifelong learning initiative has itself gained special urgency in this region following the Tashkent Conference on EFA-LLL in 2003 - the first conference of this type in this region. Participating countries set their individual initiatives and by working together, achieved great success. We see now, for example, that the lifelong learning concept has been promoted through the development of pilot projects in all countries. In addition, an institutional expansion of life skills training has occurred and a network for adult training is growing in the region. A truly remarkable outcome!

As a more concrete example, the Government of Kazakhstan is committing itself to pilot e-learning programmes in 537 schools this academic year, with the ambitious goal of involving 90% of schools by 2020. Mongolia has also made
strong efforts to develop ICT for lifelong learning through the introduction of recent policy, infrastructure, projects and resources, as well as investing in ICT education for both students and teachers.

Unfortunately however, the picture is not all roses and there are of course remaining challenges. Despite efforts, there are still children out of school in countries of Central Asia and in some countries, the figures are increasing. Disparity in access to quality education remains, and there is often a lack of political support with weak frameworks to really achieve a culture of lifelong learning. I should stress, however, that I point this out not to paint a bleak picture. It is instead to indicate the great potential of ICT in education to both help us achieve the Education for All (EFA) goals, and beyond that, to establish learning societies. To this end, UNESCO is ready to support.

5) The role of UNESCO

The mission of our organization, UNESCO, is unique. As a specialized agency of the UN system, we have been given the very monumental task of “the building of peace, the alleviation of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information."

In this quest, the Education for All (EFA) goals have driven us forward in our commitment to lifelong learning, with a focus on quantity, equality and quality. In particular, the EFA goals call for the provision of quality education for all stages of the life cycle, from early childhood (Goal 1), to primary schools age (Goal 2) to youth and adult (Goals 3 and 4) both in formal and non-formal settings. Goals 5 and 6 ensure gender and social equality in terms of access to quality education. Hence, the EFA goals call for lifelong education programmes that value quantity, equality, and quality.

More specifically, UNESCO works to achieve lifelong learning through improving literacy rates, improving opportunities for education including in non-formal settings and TVET institutions as well as through support in higher education and open/distance education. Our work involves policy advocacy, support to development of national policy, curriculum and service delivery, capacity development of government staff, the promotion of international and regional cooperation and information sharing, and support to conduct assessment and research in areas connected to lifelong learning in our Member States. UIL is also
preparing to establish the UNESCO Global Learning Cities Network (UNESCO-GLCN).

UNESCO’s 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report, with its focus on youth and skills, reminds us that education is not only about making sure all children attend school. Opportunities to find decent work, earn a living, contribute to communities and societies meaningfully requires first and foremost the capacity for lifelong learning. In this context, information and communication technologies can – and will – play a critical role. They will facilitate new ways of learning and they will open doors to those otherwise side-lined from the opportunity of a formal education.

Ladies and gentlemen –

Lifelong learning, an age-old concept, remains the cornerstone to development and to improving the quality of life for all. Given the changes we all experience as part of a rapidly changing world and the challenges that these changes present, lifelong learning retains - if not gains - in significance today. Improving ICT in education will drive lifelong learning forward, motivating us all to learn in new ways and to continue learning throughout life. This is why I believe this gathering is so important. This is why I’m so pleased to be here for this special occasion and this is why I’m very much looking forward to our deliberations over the coming days.

On that note, it is my hope that this symposium brings forth new ideas, knowledge and as UNESCO Assistant Director General for Education, Qian Tang, has highlighted in his opening address, the opportunity for us to really team up, to work together to tackle many of the challenges to improving ICT in education and lifelong learning in the Central Asian region.

Finally, may this symposium spark in each of us the desire to learn, relearn and continue learning, not just throughout the duration of this event, but for the entirety of lives.

Thank you!