Professor Jhurry, Vice Chancellor of the University of Mauritius

Mr Kiran Bhujun, Director Technical Education, Ministry of Education

Representatives of the Association of African Universities

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Colleagues and Students

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Dwarka-Canabady, I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to the University of Mauritius for inviting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade to contribute to the Annual African Universities Week.

The theme of this year’s celebration is “Towards a Peaceful and Secure Africa through Quality Higher Education”. The link between higher education, peace and development is undeniable and cuts across all spheres of life. This is why the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development gives utmost importance to quality education. Indeed one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the Agenda, namely SDG 4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education. And Target 4.3 of SDG 4 explicitly provides that by 2030, all women and men should have access to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including universities.

On the continental front, Agenda 2063, Africa’s action plan for socio-economic transformation, also acknowledges that higher education is a building block for working towards a peaceful and secure continent. It
demands that Africa invests in science, technology, engineering and mathematics so that Africans can drive the development of their continent.

Let’s have a look at some of the initiatives taken globally, on the continent and in the region to promote Quality Higher Education and hence a peaceful and secure Africa.

The African Union has established the Pan-African University. The key missions of the university are to strengthen African higher education and research, address quality of education and promote intra-African collaboration innovation.

The AU further devised the Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa to place science, technology and innovation at the centre of Africa’s socio-economic development and to enhance the impact of sciences on critical sectors such as security.

The regional organisations to which Mauritius is a party have also shown concern about the need to promote quality higher education. In June this year, SADC Ministers responsible for education and training highlighted the need to increase the uptake of Technical and Vocational Education Training to support entrepreneurship and skills development. They emphasized the importance of harmonising education policies in the region to facilitate mobility of skills and labour.

SADC countries have also approved the establishment of the SADC University of Transformation. They feel that higher education curricula must focus on science, technology and innovation if the industrialization of the region is to be achieved as envisaged in the bloc’s Industrial Strategy and Roadmap 2063. Human resources must indeed be conversant with
emerging technologies in robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, big
data and biotechnology.

With regard to COMESA, Heads of State and Government approved the setting up of the COMESA Virtual University in 2016. The objective was to inculcate the dimension of regional integration in learning in higher education institutions.

The COMESA subsequently launched its virtual regional integration master's degree programme in a bid to speed up the process of integration among the 19 member states. Participating universities include the University of Mauritius, the University of Nairobi, the University of Seychelles and the University of Antananarivo.

The United Nations have also been instrumental in assisting the continent to promote peace and security in Africa through quality higher education. Indeed, through the UNESCO Global Citizenship Education, the agency empowers learners of all ages to become active promoters of more peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies.

Furthermore UNESCO has launched the Better Education for Africa’s Rise (BEAR) project in 2017 in collaboration with the Republic of Korea. The objective of the project is to support Eastern African countries to improve the relevance and quality of their TVET systems. In Ethiopia, the project activities focus on the agro-processing sector; in Kenya on the environmental sector and in Madagascar on the textiles industry.

It is interesting to note that certain countries outside the region like Germany are also contributing to the promotion of quality higher education in Africa. Indeed, the German Academic Exchange Service, through the Programme
African Excellence seeks to significantly contribute to the quality and relevance of selected disciplines at African universities, create research capacities and establish networks between African universities and research institutions.

Japan is also massively investing in the field of education on the continent. Collaboration between African and Japanese universities has been reinforced under the Tokyo International Conference of Africa’s Development with a focus on the promotion of science, technology and innovation.

China equally sees education as a prerequisite to sustainable development. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan includes cooperation in the field of education, and in particular in science and technology. Under FOCAC, China provides opportunities to young African students to pursue their Master’s or PhD in China.

Through a wide number of training programmes and scholarships, other countries like India, US, Australia and Pakistan also contribute to the efforts of the continent to promote peace and security though quality higher education.

All the above initiatives bear testimony to the importance which the international community attaches to the role of quality higher education in promoting a secure and peaceful Africa. However, peace and security cannot be taken for granted, the more so that in the 2019 Fragile States Index, 21 of the 30 most fragile countries are to be found on the African continent. Efforts to maintain peace and security should therefore be continuous.
Let us see how we can improve the contribution of higher education to peace and security on the African continent.

African countries should first and foremost have the political will to make higher education their priority. Unless and until African countries realize that they should invest their scarce and limited resources into higher education, the objective of a secure and peaceful Africa will take longer to be attained.

African countries should also ensure equitable access to quality higher education. However, it is a fact that the financial burden to expand access and improve the quality of higher education is enormous. Africa cannot do it on its own. This is why resources should be mobilized through diversified sources like development partners, private sector, south-south cooperation, Foreign Direct Investment and the Diaspora.

Commitment to raise research and development funds to 1% of gross domestic product is another important element. Conducive environments should be created for research and development in order to improve the position of African countries on innovation indexes. According to the Global Innovation Index 2019 Report, only 10 of the top 100 countries are in Africa.

The majority of Africa’s skill development schemes are disconnected from the demands of the labour market. Higher education and training systems should provide youth and adults with the knowledge, competencies and skills required for the working world.

Peace education, that is, an education which provides learners with the values needed to live together in a world where extremism, xenophobia, exclusion and conflicts threaten peace should be promoted. Principles such
as justice, solidarity, cultural tolerance, reconciliation and dialogue should form the basis of peace education.

Peace education programmes should focus on apology and forgiveness. In Rwanda for example, young generations are taught about the country’s past in order to preserve its memory but at the same time, prevent future atrocities. Learning about the genocide helps young Rwandans to have empathy for others and be responsible for their actions.

Post-independence education systems in many parts of Africa have not evolved away from their colonial origins. This is why countries like Kenya and South Africa have embarked into movements to decolonize their higher education system by reframing the curricula in such a way that Africa becomes the centre of teaching, learning and research.

However, reframing the curricula is not sufficient. The attitude of academics to the whole process of decolonization of higher education is also important. As the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o puts it, we should foremost decolonize our minds if we want to generate home-grown solutions to African challenges.

As an African country, albeit physically separated from mainland Africa, Mauritius spares no efforts to contribute to the promotion of a peaceful and secure Africa through quality higher education. It is imperative that we join hands with our brother nations and engage in a process of learning from and with each other to address common challenges such as climate change, food insecurity, poverty, violence and hunger. It is in this context that Mauritius has signed MoUs with a number of African countries in the field of Higher Education.
Given its proximity and historical ties to Africa, Mauritius is becoming an attractive destination for African students. To-date Mauritius is home to more than 1000 students from Africa. As part of its commitment to promote capacity-building across Africa, the Government offers scholarships to African students.

The Government together with the Economic Development Board carries out campaigns to attract prestigious universities from around the world to set up campuses in Mauritius, and efforts are being made for the existing institutions to offer programmes in niche areas such as ocean economy, renewable energy and Fintech which cater to the industry needs of the region. With a view to encouraging international students to study and work on a part-time basis in Mauritius, the Government has also introduced a student visa scheme.

The Government has also agreed to host a United Nations Technology and Innovation Lab. UNTILS as they are known have been set up in India, Malaysia, Finland and Egypt to drive development agendas through Innovation and Technology. UNTILS help host countries develop technological innovations related to key thematic areas. In Egypt, UNTIL focuses on agriculture while in Malaysia the focus is on ethical fashion. It has been agreed that in Mauritius, UNTIL will focus on four key areas namely Life below Water, Climate Action, Reduced Inequalities, and last but not least Quality Education.

In addition to assisting the Mauritius authorities develop technology innovation in these key areas, UNTIL will help Mauritius address a major challenge, that of eliminating the disconnect among Government, Private
Sector, Academia, NGOs and Civil Society on issues relating to research, technology and innovation.

I have named a few initiatives which Mauritius has taken to promote quality higher education. However, if the Government is to transform Mauritius into a Higher Education Hub for the region and beyond, a number of challenges should be addressed. Air connectivity with Africa is one of those challenges. It is important that Mauritius diversify its destinations and enhance its air traffic flows within the continent.

There is also the need to improve the working and living conditions of students. Along with promoting the country as a knowledge hub, the Government should attract FDI in quality infrastructure in order to make it appealing to foreign students.

The above described initiatives to promote a secure and peaceful Africa through quality higher education are not exhaustive. Moreover, it is an ongoing process and a lot more remains to be achieved. The onus is on Government, the private sector, civil society and international bodies such as the UN to work together to meet the challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for your attention.