

In our lifetime our planet has undergone one of the most dramatic transformations in its history. It has moved from the aftermath of the industrial revolution to a new era in which knowledge, information and new technologies shape our lives. Yet, despite the scientific and technological changes that have swept the world, over one billion people in the developing countries are engulfed in abject poverty and nearly one billion are illiterate.

The world faces formidable challenges as our planet stands on the threshold of a new millennium. As the UNESCO Commission on Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (the Delors Report) noted, about one fifth of the globe is illiterate with increasingly dysfunctional school systems where the need is greatest. Furthermore, the numbers are growing – 6.2 billion people by 2000. Countries least able to support the burgeoning populations under 15 years of age have the highest growth rates, are the least equipped to educate, to provide jobs and to assure adequate health and social services. The resulting rapid urbanisation with its attendant exploitation of cheap labour, increased crime, violence and environmental devastation cries out for efficient educational reform and expansion.

The compelling implications for education are recognised by political leaders who understand the critical role of modernised education systems in the advancement of their societies. According to an Australian development agency some 150 million young people, mainly from developing countries, will seek access to tertiary education by the year 2025. Many more wishing to upgrade their skills will strive for admission to post-secondary institutions in the countries of the industrialized north. It is estimated that this educational demand will require the construction of one new university every week for the next 20 years. To remain competitive nations will require preparation for new kinds of employment as well as workforce re-training. Moreover, the continuing pressures for equality of opportunity will require nations to transform themselves into *learning societies*. Post-secondary educational facilities must be widened to reach those once considered unreachable.