Launch of the UNESCO Chair
Tuesday 14 October 2008

Remarks by Prof Pal Ahluwalia
Pro Vice Chancellor: Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences

Colleagues and distinguished guests

It is a great honour for the University of South Australia to be awarded the first UNESCO Chair in this state. I am deeply humbled both personally and professionally to be the inaugural chairholder of the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Diasporas and Reconciliation Studies.

Securing this Chair has been the result of much hard work from many of my colleagues. I would especially like to thank the following:

- Dr Anna Ciccarelli who was instrumental in supporting this initiative from its inception
- our Deputy Vice Chancellor Research, Professor Caroline McMillen
- the Honorable Bob Hawke for his support
- our previous Vice Chancellor Denise Bradley and the current Vice Chancellor Professor Peter Høj, who has further championed the Chair.

To provide you with some context, UNESCO Chairs are awarded annually to individual colleges, universities and research institutions to initiate programs that further research and training in one of UNESCO’s fields of competence.

A Chair may be established by reinforcing an existing teaching or research program and giving it an international dimension, or one may be established as a new teaching and research unit. Generally, in any given year, only one UNESCO Chair is established in any single country.

In this case, the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Diasporas and Reconciliation Studies will complement UNESCO’s work in the field of social transformations and will provide a valuable contribution to international dialogue and policy development on international migration and social integration.
We are living in ‘unsettling times’. Indeed, as Mahmood Mamdami points out in his book, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*,

> We have just ended a century of violence, one possibly more violent than any other in recorded history: world wars and colonial conquests; civil wars, revolutions, and counterrevolutions. Although the magnitude of this violence is staggering, it does not astound us. The modern political sensibility sees most political violence as necessary to historical progress.

The ills of the previous century do not appear to be abating; rather they are manifesting themselves in much more global forms that can be characterised by a range of factors including:

- the struggle to understand social, cultural and religious differences in complex multicultural societies, often as a result of diasporic populations
- the need to heal the effects of colonisation with indigenous/First Nations peoples
- the influence of media culture on civil society, politics and identity formation
- the increasing contrast between first world affluence and third world poverty
- the alienating effects of living in the conditions of a globalising post-industrial economy
- the emergence of global terrorist networks; and
- the unsettling of the relation between identity and place, exemplified by the global flows of diasporas, asylum seekers and refugees.

Whilst it is recognised that most of these issues are not new, these factors are aggregating in new ways, giving rise to a major shift in global realities and sensibilities.

Locally, this is exemplified by the Cronulla riots and the Sheik Hilali affair. On a global basis, we have all witnessed firsthand the events of September 11, the bombings in Bali, Madrid and London as well as the global flow of diasporas and displaced people.

Certainly, fear, stereotyping and suspicion of ethnic, racial and religious differences have intensified in recent years.

The exact nature of this new constellation and its implications are yet to be clearly understood.
But if Australia is to respond skilfully to these challenges, research is required that enables the development of innovative alternative approaches.

The Chair will allow us to meet this challenge through partnerships with key researchers both locally and internationally. The aim of the Chair is to promote and emphasise research in the areas of transnational diasporas and reconciliation studies.

This will be accomplished by holding masterclasses, workshops and conferences and inviting international scholars especially from the post-colonial world. These activities are aimed most specifically at capacity building and the facilitation of the exchange of knowledge.

The research program focuses upon further capacity building and institutional development of informal networks.

The host institution, the Centre for Post-colonial Studies in the Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies here at UniSA, is a multidisciplinary, interdepartmentally based research institute with a capacity to facilitate academic training and interdisciplinary research, and to serve as an information resource and networking unit.

This project brings together scholars and experts in the field with a particular focus on diaspora studies, reconciliation studies, post-colonial studies, security studies and cultural theory in an effort to develop new approaches to some of the most pressing issues of our times.

It will collaborate with researchers from Australia, Botswana, India, Ireland, Israel, Malaysia, Pakistan, Palestine, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, Trinidad, United Kingdom and the United States.

Such research and collaborations are directly relevant to UNESCO priorities including peace, environment, human rights, cultural diversity, dialogue among civilisations as well as the basic elements necessary for sustainable development.

As such, the research program has great national and international benefits as it seeks to:

- enhance the capacity of governments to create safe and secure environments for all citizens regardless of ethnic, religious or cultural background;
• contribute to existing literature and resources in the areas of transnational diasporas and reconciliation studies bringing these together in a way that as yet has not been undertaken in Australia or overseas;
• strengthen research partnerships with international scholars and within Australia’s universities; and
• demonstrate Australia’s commitment to cultural diversity, intercultural communication and international collaboration.

Apart from ensuring that there is increased and vital understanding of global human wellbeing, the Chair will also establish valuable synergies with the broader knowledge and collaborative opportunities afforded within the Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies.

Researchers in the HRISS conduct world class cross-disciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences that supports an ecologically diverse and sustainable world of inclusive democratic societies.

Also, the UNESCO Chair will develop deep connections with the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, which is hosting this event today. This centre represents an important engagement with local and international communities through public learning activities such as lectures and seminars, alliances, and research projects.

We are honoured in having the former Australian Prime Minister, the Hon Bob Hawke, as the patron of our Hawke Centre, and Nelson Mandela as the international patron. The centre, which attracts national and international speakers, offers informed viewpoints on key concerns for the 21st century, including sustainable societies, global citizenship, democracy, youth leadership, mediation, and responsible economic development.

In this role, I will strive to establish a culture in which social justice and inclusion will be pursued fairly and impartially.

I will develop innovative approaches to some of the most pressing issues of our times … and today’s launch and subsequent development of the Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding is a first step in that process.
Thank you for your support and I look forward to informing you in the near future of opportunities that have been explored and to celebrating milestones as they are achieved.