AUSTRALIAN INTERVENTION
at the 40th session of the General Conference
of UNESCO

H.E. Mr Angus Mackenzie
Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of Australia
to UNESCO

Friday, 15 November 2019
Mr President, Madame Director General, Distinguished Delegates,

UNESCO member states convene for the 40th Session of the General Conference at a critical juncture along the organisation’s path. Significant change is buffeting the international system; a system that has been fundamental to our collective efforts to pursue global peace and prosperity since UNESCO was founded.

We have prospered within a system of international rules and norms that have served to protect our interests and support our values.

But the principles of working cooperatively in the face of global challenges; of the application of international law and other accepted norms; the articulation of human rights and freedoms – all of which have been vital to Australia’s security and prosperity – are now being challenged.

How the international community – UNESCO’s member states – respond to these challenges, has implications for the whole UNESCO family. In this contested environment, UNESCO’s role in setting standards and developing normative agreements in an inclusive way, which guide member states has never been more important.

Australia, as a founding member, has actively engaged in UNESCO’s diverse work program and made important contributions to its achievements.

And Australian communities have shown their commitment to UNESCO’s activities through their participation in many of these.

The city of Melbourne hosted International Jazz Day in April. Two more Australian cities (Bendigo and Ballarat) joined the UNESCO Creative Cities Network this year. Australian Chairs continue to make significant contributions in their fields of expertise. Prominent Australians are being recognised for outstanding contributions by UNESCO prizes. And, Australians celebrated the inscription of Budj Bim– a 6,000-year-old indigenous aquaculture system - on the World heritage list: the first Australian site recognised solely for its indigenous cultural values.
At this General Conference, we look forward to the adoption of the world’s first international agreement in higher education – the **Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education**. Australia has been privileged to be a part of the development of this ground-breaking Convention - that will shape the future landscape of education.

In an increasingly interconnected world, the Global Convention can provide all member states with a practical and sustainable way to realise the economic, cultural and social benefits education brings to individuals, their families and communities. It can also promote access to quality education - a goal of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

Australia attaches the highest priority to **girls and women’s education and economic empowerment**, which helps lift households and communities out of poverty. UNESCO is well-positioned to leverage expertise and share best practice to help transform the lives of millions of girls unable to access basic education.

We have been proud to co-chair the International Steering Committee on Indigenous Languages and to host a wide range of events across Australia and internationally as part of the **International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL)**.

By increasing knowledge and the use of Indigenous languages, we help build resilient, empathetic and culturally fluent young people, better able to meet the challenges ahead. Australia looks forward to supporting efforts to maintain the momentum and achievements of IYIL.

Through our current membership of the **World Heritage Committee**, Australia has shown leadership in supporting collective action to defend and promote the values and technical integrity of the World Heritage Convention, and we remain committed to this goal.

UNESCO has a pivotal role to play, too, in ensuring people can freely express their opinions, beliefs and ambitions. We commend UNESCO for its ongoing work to **protect journalists** and to promote the diversity of cultural expression.
Importantly, we also need to hear the voices of all member states as we look towards future challenges. Australia seeks a stronger voice for **Pacific Island countries** in UNESCO programs and governing bodies – so that UNESCO is informed by the diverse experiences and perspectives of regions at the forefront of our most pressing challenges, and where the success of the 2030 Agenda should be measured. Our work at this conference, too, must fully recognise this need.

Facing these challenges and pursuing solutions, more than ever, we need responsive, nimble and efficient organisations able to harness the value of each member state and achieve measurable outcomes. Australia will continue to support **greater effectiveness and accountability across the UN system** including the consistent application of **UN reform**. This includes UNESCO’s efforts to work smarter – making it easier for people to engage in its activities.

Mr President, Australia takes this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to work through UNESCO to address global challenges - in a spirit of partnership - to strive for enduring peace and prosperity. We welcome the efforts of our fellow member states to do the same.

Thank you.