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BOLOGNA FOLLOW-UP SEMINAR

“EXPLORING THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA”

**Athens, Greece
19-20 February 2003
Divani Caravel Hotel**

CONCLUSIONS

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Conclusions

A. The issues of the “social dimension” and the “public good”

1. In the Berlin Communiqué, the Ministers should explicitly reaffirm the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process towards the construction of the European Higher Education Area. They should also reaffirm their position that higher education should be considered a public good and a public responsibility. Moreover, the Ministers should specify the social aspects of the European Higher Education Area, taking also stock of the outcomes of the official Bologna Seminar held in Athens and of the European Student Convention.
2. Improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area should counterbalance the need for competitiveness and be seen as a value in itself as well as one of the conditions of competitiveness, and should aim at reducing the social gap and strengthening social cohesion, both at national and at European level. In the knowledge-based society and economy, the social component should be given considerable concern with regards to research as well.
3. Higher education as a public good cannot only be interpreted as an economic issue but also as a social and political one. In that context, higher education should be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction and the defence of free education.
4. Under conditions of wide access to higher education, the need for quality and accountability becomes predominant, and should be realised through the establishment of appropriate quality assurance procedures. At the same time, the maintenance of public support on the one hand and the efficient use of the available resources on the other are of special importance as well.
5. Appropriate studying and living conditions should be ensured for the students so that they can finalise successfully their studies in time without being prevented by obstacles related to their social and economic background. In this context, it is necessary to introduce and maintain social support schemes for the students, including grants, portable as far as possible, loan schemes, health care and insurance, housing and academic and social counselling.
6. Removing the obstacles to the free movement of students should be considered a prerequisite for provision of equal mobility opportunities to all students irrespective of their social and economic background, thus providing for a genuine mobility.
7. Participants underlined the need for on-going research at European level, including comparative analyses and best practices, so that the social dimension of the Bologna Process and the consideration of higher education as public good and public responsibility to be further improved.

B. The issue of the GATS negotiations

1. Participants took notice of the emerging global market for higher education services as well as developments in trading these services in the framework of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) within the World Trade Organisation (WTO).
2. Participants also noted the increasing trend towards global competition in higher education. However, they reaffirmed that the main objective driving the creation of the EHEA and the internationalisation of HE on a global level, should first and foremost be based on academic values and co-operation between different countries and regions of the world.
3. Participants welcomed the announcement of the European Commission not to include education in its negotiation proposal for the ongoing GATS negotiations as a positive development. The majority also welcomed the efforts of keeping the existing commitments of the EU limited entirely to for-profit privately funded education services.
4. Participants reaffirmed the commitment of the Prague Communiqué for considering higher education a public good and stressed that any negotiations about trade in education services must not jeopardise the responsibility of financing the public education sector. They further stressed, that recognition agreements and the right of countries to implement quality assurance mechanisms should not be put in question.
5. Generally, participants believe that the positions to develop future and maintain existing regulatory and funding frameworks on national and international level have to be guaranteed.
6. Participants also believe that it is necessary to continue to develop alternative frameworks for internationalisation within the Bologna Process and the international context based on academic co-operation, trust and respect for diversity.
7. Furthermore, it is necessary in each country to assess the possible impacts of GATS on education systems from a legal and practical perspective, also taking into account the role of higher education in society.
8. Participants expressed the need for transparency in the GATS negotiations and that GATS negotiators should consult closely the higher education stakeholders.
9. Participants stressed that in case of the necessity of dispute settlement under GATS procedures, experts from the higher education sector should be consulted.
10. It is asked from the Bologna Follow-Up Group to elaborate a text proposal on European higher education and GATS for inclusion in the Berlin Communiqué by the next meeting of the Bologna Follow-up Group in June 2003.