

Bucharest Message to the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education – Experiences and Recommendations from the Europe Region

I. Preamble

A decade ago UNESCO organized its first world conference to discuss developments and issues of higher education. This meeting established the principles and objectives to move higher education forward toward the service of society. As indicated in the title of the conference - *Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action* (UNESCO, 5-9 October 1998) - this global meeting of various stakeholders encouraged Member States and the higher education institutions to undertake reforms which inspired major transformations of higher education.

Today, it is appropriate to undertake another review of higher education as we enter the second decade of this new century. Such a reflection is even timelier as it is quite clear that if current and future global and regional challenges are to be met, the contribution of higher education is both expected and indispensable. The *2009 World Conference on Higher Education: The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development* (UNESCO, 5-8 July 2009) will reflect on the main aspects of the new dynamics “*in*” and “*for*” higher education.

II. Background, Context and Agenda of the Forum

As was the case a decade ago, several regional events have taken place in the run up to the *2009 World Conference on Higher Education* in order to be able to provide specific “**regional perspectives**” to the global meeting. In this context, the *UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the Europe Region: Access, Values, Quality, and Competitiveness* took place in Bucharest, Romania (22-24 May 2009).

The meeting was hosted by the Romanian Government and co-organized by UNESCO’s European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES) and the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation on behalf of the Government of Romania, and in collaboration with the Council of Europe, the European Commission, OECD, the European University Association (EUA), the European Students’ Union (ESU) and Education International (EI) as well as the Observatory of the Magna Charta Universitatum and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The support received from governments and other institutions was essential in holding this important meeting, and this should be highly acknowledged.

The Forum brought together representatives from governments, institutions of higher education, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and discussed present trends and the further development of higher education foremost in the Europe Region [the countries of Europe, North America, and Israel].

The work of the Forum was based on the report entitled *Ten Years Back and Ten Years Forward: Developments and Trends in Higher Education in Europe Region* as well as thematic papers on four key topics - **access, values, quality, and competitiveness**, which were identified as being of strategic importance and regional relevance and which were prepared by top-level experts in the respective areas. In addition, the challenges of **internationalization** of higher education in a globalizing world were discussed as a **transversal theme** [all documents of the Forum are accessible on www.cepes.ro/Forum].

The debates were structured around the four key topics mentioned above, considering the necessity to undertake a stocktaking analysis of the past decade before developing ideas and proposals about the future development of higher education during the coming ten years. Obviously, the substance of the thematic papers is closely linked. In addition, the transversal importance of internationalization in the context of the four topical areas was dealt with in a special session in which representatives from other regions who participated in the Forum, had been able to discuss the Europe Region's experience which could also be of relevance to other regions, taking into consideration that higher education in the countries belonging to the Europe Region represents an important segment of the global higher education setting.

The most important development in the Europe Region during the last decade was the launching of the Bologna Process, when in June 1999 ministers responsible for higher education from 29 European countries met in Bologna, and signed the *Bologna Declaration* and agreed on joint objectives which would result in the establishment of a *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) by 2010. On a voluntary basis, the Bologna Process became a far-reaching process of reforms of higher education systems and of international recognition arrangements which today encompasses 46 countries. Its principal organizational instruments are a three-degree structure often referred to as the Bachelor's-Master's-Doctorate cycle, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) to promote the most widespread student mobility and a *Diploma Supplement* which was developed jointly by the Council of Europe, the European Commission and UNESCO-CEPES. As it stands, with its objectives, action lines and values and on condition of their thorough and balanced implementation in the upcoming years, the Bologna Process is essential to facilitate greater comparability and compatibility of higher education systems in Europe.

Important progress has been made in facilitating academic mobility beyond the countries participating in the Bologna Process through the ratification by 48 States, of which 46 are Member States of UNESCO, of the joint *Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region* [also referred to as the *1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention*].

The Bologna Process has led to the most intense reform measures of higher education in Europe; it has gone beyond a mere coordination of higher education policies set by national public authorities which acknowledge, for the first time, the need for a common frame of reference in the field of higher education in order to better address the societal needs of a region that shares values such as democracy, human rights and social justice,

while promoting Europe's diversity in the international context. It can also be described as a first step in a region-wide higher education reform process that brings together all the main stake-holders of higher education – governments, higher education institutions, academic staff and students, employers, as well as key international governmental and non-governmental organizations in the field of higher education, including the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the European University Association (EUA), UNESCO-CEPES, the European Students' Union (ESU), Education International (EI), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and BUSINESS EUROPE. Together with the national authorities they form the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) responsible for the preparation of the decisions taken at the biennial ministerial meetings. The most remarkable aspect of this process is how, within the relatively short time horizon of ten years, an increasing Europe-wide consensus has emerged on a voluntary basis and with the participation of such diverse constituencies. In this regard the participation of representatives of the academic community of staff and students, as key stakeholders, ensures that the process respects the diversity of higher education in Europe and therewith enables the ownership and grassroots implementation of the Bologna Process at all levels: **institutional, national and European.**

Most recently, the EHEA entered a new decade, the Bologna Process 2020. Having recognized that the full implementation of the Bologna objectives will still require efforts on the part of all stakeholders, additional operational goals were formulated for the next decade. Confronted with the demographic challenge of an ageing population in many countries the members of the Bologna Process must undertake all measures to optimise their human resources. These goals include, *inter alia*, joint policies towards broadening access, designing lifelong learning strategies and enhancing the employability for graduates. Furthermore, the strengthening of the Europeanization and internationalization process through increased mobility of students, staff and researchers is a top priority. In this context, mobility is also considered to be an objective which paves the way to open and tolerant societies, while creating a conducive setting for cultural exchange and diversified, academically meaningful learning, research or teaching experiences. All these issues were reaffirmed in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve *Communiqué* which was adopted at the Conference of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009).

III. Experiences and Recommendations

We, the participants in the *UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the Europe Region*, would like to share our collective experiences on the development of higher education in the last decade and present the following observations and non-binding recommendations:

Access and Equity

1. Access is taken in its broadest reading to encompass entry into, participation in, completion of higher education as well as achieving its outcomes. It comprises both

absolute and relative levels of participation and is intimately linked to equity. It is therefore associated with the notion that equitable higher education systems are those that ensure that the achievement of educational potential at higher education level is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including of factors such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age or disability.

2. Increased participation in higher education has become a reality in many fields of study in the countries of the Europe Region. This quantitative growth emphasises and reflects the importance of higher education in the emerging knowledge-based society in which access to studies and advanced knowledge is essential for economic development, social cohesion and a functional democratic society. Despite this positive development, there is still a need to undertake measures to improve access to and completion of higher education, particularly for individuals from families with no tradition of higher education, social minorities, immigrant communities, low-income families and other disadvantaged groups. Undertaking of such measures would enhance equity of higher education systems. In this regard Member States are encouraged to undertake measures in accordance with their obligations and commitments under the *UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

3. The student body within higher education should reflect the diversity of the population in a given country or region. Access to higher education, including to higher-status institutions and post-graduate studies, should be widened by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies. This involves improving the learning environment, removing barriers to study, and providing adequate appropriate financial support for students to be able to benefit from study opportunities at all levels as well as to contribute to a timely completion of studies. It also entails making available extensive information about the benefits and costs of higher education and providing guidance and counselling services. This includes the importance of student support services and the key role of its professionals. Efforts to achieve equity in higher education should be complemented by actions at other levels of the educational system. In order to be fully effective educational policy needs to intervene much earlier.

4. Although participation by women in higher education has increased to the extent that almost everywhere in the Europe Region they now represent the majority of students in first cycle programmes, their participation still remains uneven across types of institutions and academic disciplines, and among the ranks of higher education teaching personnel. Therefore, we call for further improvement in access for women to studies in science and engineering and to post-graduate studies, as well as to teaching and research positions.

5. The developments of the last decade confirm the importance of lifelong learning as a priority policy measure leading to more inclusive and flexible systems in which higher education systems will assure greater equality of educational opportunity at different stages of life, and thus contribute to personal development and employability.

6. The developments of the last decade also demonstrate that increased participation in higher education [also referred to as “mass higher education”] can be achieved but only in a concerted way with diversification in such areas as organization of study programmes, institutional missions, composition of academic staff as well as teaching practices and role of research. It is clear that there is a social responsibility that institutions of higher education, in collaboration with other stakeholders, need to assume for improving access and equity.

7. Equity objectives can also be achieved through the sharing of knowledge. A strategy of open educational resources by institutions of higher education would make the knowledge they produce accessible in a spirit of co-operation between regions.

Values

8. Institutions of higher education promote values essential for democratic society as well as for the cultural development of society and the personal development of individuals. For this very reason higher education cannot be separated from values and ethics. They are, together with academic freedom and institutional autonomy, key tenets of higher education. Without being grounded in such values academic staff cannot teach and students cannot acquire clear thinking, cogent communication, and an ability to make good judgment and to be socially responsible. The recent financial crisis has also illustrated that a lack of such qualities and competencies can bring about overwhelming negative consequences. Furthermore, only with academic freedom and institutional autonomy, are higher education institutions able to strive for truth and further knowledge in order to contribute to a sustainable development. Therefore, higher education institutions are encouraged to set up ethical committees as well as to adopt codes of conduct.

9. Knowledge-based societies are not only responsible for the production of new and relevant knowledge and technological innovations, but also for the critical evaluation of economic, social and cultural developments in society. This cannot be undertaken without clear commitments to civic values, democracy, justice and tolerance. We, therefore, confirm and recommend that those commitments, resulting in local and global citizenship, become integral learning outcomes for all students.

10. The quality of higher education builds upon a fruitful and collegial cooperation inside the academic community in both teaching and research. Therein, students should be considered as contributing partners, particularly with regard to its educational objectives, and as members of the academic community. Malpractice in higher education needs to be addressed and counteracted also by providing education and training for such cases. The establishment of an international ombudsman for resolving conflicts related to principles and values of higher education could further help the informal resolution of conflicts.

11. Social responsibilities should be exercised by institutions of higher education in the context of academic freedom which includes the freedom of expression of academics within and outside their institutions, the freedom of teaching, conducting research and publishing results. It also includes students' rights. All of them are in line with *the Bucharest Declaration on Ethical Values and Principles of Higher Education in the Europe Region* which was adopted at the *International Conference on Ethical and Moral Dimensions for Higher Education and Science in Europe* (Bucharest, 2-5 September 2004).

12. As many higher education institutions are of a multi-disciplinary character, the support of all areas of study and research needs to be ensured, thus not only focusing on areas of immediate commercial interest. It is only by preserving a culture of diverse scholarship that a true knowledge-based society can be formed.

13. It is in this context that special attention should be paid to a compliance with the *1997 Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel* which requires the Member States to submit reports allowing the Director-General of UNESCO to prepare a comprehensive report on the world situation with regard to academic freedom and respect for the human rights of higher education teaching personnel. Additionally, the establishment of a global index on academic freedom should be supported.

14. Knowledge-based societies are not only responsible for the production of new and relevant knowledge and technological innovations, but also for the critical evaluation of economic, social and cultural developments in society. This cannot be undertaken without clear commitments to civic values, democracy, justice and tolerance. We, therefore, confirm and recommend that those commitments, resulting in local and global citizenship, become integral learning outcomes for all students.

15. Multipolarity in key societal areas – culture, religion, economy, communication, is a principal characteristic of the present world, where whole societies and individuals are confronted with contradictory forces, higher education institutions are one of key places where the unbiased and free search for a “greater good” for society and the individual can be undertaken. These values of higher education also need to be transmitted and promoted in society at large.

Quality

16. Although the notion of quality in higher education is high on the agenda of all countries within the Europe Region, it has been of particular concern in the context of the Bologna Process, specifically in relation to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* introduced in 2005. The *Standards* represent a positive development and have been widely used throughout Europe. However problems of defining, measuring, judging and implementing quality still remain to be further discussed, especially with regard to external and internal issues of quality. Therefore, before judging the quality of higher education institutions, full transparency of

the criteria applied must be guaranteed keeping in mind the aim of developing and maintaining a quality culture and the enhancement of the effective functioning of higher education institutions.

17. The experience with regard to quality shows that it is a complex concept that must encompass all missions of higher education. Quality assurance and quality enhancement systems can only work if all stakeholders are involved and students and staff are seen as partners in the discussion, decision-making and implementation of a quality culture in higher education institutions.

18. In light of highly diversified and flexible types of provision of higher education, the increasing number of public and private providers, the growth in international student mobility, and the various forms of cross-border provision of higher education, the design and application of quality assurance systems have become a priority. Therefore, an important challenge is the need for wider cooperation in order to further develop such systems that assess the quality of teaching and learning as well as of research.

19. It should be noted that the *European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education* (2008) is open to any quality assurance agency worldwide. It might provide greater scope for quality assessment activities in addition to national ones.

20. The *OECD/UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education* which provide an international framework to protect students, and guidance to key stakeholders on how to share the responsibility of assuring quality provision should be discussed, disseminated and mainstreamed in the design of national and institutional quality assurance systems.

Competitiveness

21. Higher education and research are essential for the social and cultural development and the economic competitiveness of our societies. Universities and research institutions preserve and create knowledge and develop competences and skills that assist individuals to realize their personal fulfilment and to become active citizens. Higher education and research also help citizens to pursue successful careers and businesses to innovate. Higher education therefore has an important role to play in enhancing the economic development and competitiveness of our societies.

22. Academic competitiveness, including the competition amongst institutions, academics and students for research funding, awards, and honours should be independently assessed based on transparent academic and scientific criteria and carried out in such a way that all institutions, countries and regions have opportunity to contribute to and benefit from the global knowledge-based society. While there is an overall acceptance of the need for greater openness and transparency with regard to differences in missions and performance of higher education institutions, there is a divergence of opinion with regard to instruments, methodologies and outcomes used as transparency and quality assurance tools such as classifications and ranking. Such

instruments should meet the criteria set up in the *Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions*.

23. There is a growing acceptance of the need of development of “common references” in relation to qualifications frameworks at national and international levels. This is being carried out notably through the *Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area* [within the Bologna Process] and the *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* [within the European Union]. Other common references include the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* [within the Bologna Process], the *European Charter for Researchers* and the *Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* [within the European Union].

24. Academic competitiveness may also be enhanced by opening up national funding schemes to foreign participants and by reinforcing transnational funding schemes such as *Erasmus*, *Erasmus Mundus*, the European Research Council and the substantial funding schemes in North America and Israel.

25. The *OECD/UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education* are specifically relevant for transnational education. Overall, transnational education should be viewed as opportunities that need to be fully exploited, while at the same time addressing possible negative side-effects. The *Bologna Policy Forum* which was attended by 46 countries participating in the Bologna Process and 15 other countries as well as a number of international organizations and NGOs adopted the *Statement by the Bologna Policy Forum 2009* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 29 April 2009) stating that transnational exchanges in higher education should be governed on the basis of academic values and advocating a balanced exchange of teachers, researchers and students between countries to promote fair and fruitful “brain circulation”. This also represents the principal challenge for policy development and practices for internationalization of higher education especially in relation between various regions of the globalized world.

26. Population decline and changes in age distribution are affecting higher education systems in most countries in the UNESCO Europe Region, with a consequence that higher education institutions see the need to compete for students both nationally and internationally, with the risk that international migration be required in order to overcome shortages of skilled labour. In this context, new competencies for new demands of the labour market must be anticipated and increased opportunities for higher education and lifelong learning need to be created for improving and upgrading the skills of the workforce.

IV. Looking ahead

27. The consequences of the financial crisis followed by the economic downturn are changing the context in which higher education both nationally and internationally will function in the years to come. Institutions of higher education in Europe Region as well

as in other regions are affected and cost-cutting measures are adversely affecting conditions of employment of academic staff and their professional development. The consequences of such measures could lead to a long-lasting negative impact on the quality of higher education. Given this situation, financial and economic as well as the social and cultural aspects of the future of higher education systems must be taken into consideration and more than ever the notion of “academic moral solidarity” should become a norm and source for seeking new ways of international collaboration, in particular with Sub-Saharan Africa, in order to avoid “academic protectionism” and “brain drain”.

28. From an economic point of view, in periods of recession, investments in higher education should be treated as a high public priority, as they have long-term effects on the building of human resources and the production of knowledge, and offer [on average] high rates of social and private return.

29. From a social and cultural point of view, the current financial and economic crisis is in part a result of the departure from the basic values of societal cohesion and sustainable development. There is an urgent need to redefine these values in the context of multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies and to teach and practise them in all institutions of higher education.

30. “Globalization with a human face” must become the leitmotiv of all our efforts to achieve a peaceful and sustainable world without hunger and poverty. Increased cooperation with higher education institutions in other regions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, will be one expression of human solidarity. Intensified exchanges of students and academic staff, the twinning of research programmes and the joint use of ICTs in teaching and research activities are necessary in our North-South cooperation. Competition and cooperation in higher education do not exclude each other and must be developed, with a fair amount of good will, into a win-win-situation for all stakeholders.

31. **Internationalisation** is also an aim in itself and not only a means to better fulfil other tasks, that needs its own attention, professional dedication, staff and infrastructure, well defined strategies and specific funding mechanisms and other incentives from the side of institutions, governments and international organisations.

32. The Bologna Process has demonstrated how reforming higher education in an international cooperative manner can be undertaken and implemented. The decade of its implementation can be recognized as a “regional initiative of global relevance”. The other regions might find, with appropriate modifications, the approach and mechanisms applied under the Bologna Process to be useful when formulating strategic goals in their respective national and regional higher education settings.

33. The discussions at the *UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the Europe Region* have shown that in a growingly interdependent world, the reform of higher education at the regional, national and institutional level also needs to be carried out in an international manner, while at the same time respecting the local context. A facilitating

role of UNESCO could be of great relevance and could play a key role in initiating more cooperation among the different regions.

34. In conclusion, we, the participants in the *UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the Europe Region*, affirm that higher education and research are now entering a new stage of development. Our discussions shed a common light on the most recent developments in higher education, as well as the identification of the directions and challenges which we can expect to face. We hope that our region's experience might have relevance in a global context and serve as inspiration to other regions.

35. Undoubtedly, higher education has become a very complex system which requires an adequate intrinsic knowledge about its structures and functioning. And although the crucial role of higher education is recognized, there remains a need for seeking appropriate policy directions and the formulation of adequate solutions. It also calls for the services and expertise provided by UNESCO-CEPES and its partners to collect and disseminate information as well as to provide expert knowledge from a multi-national and inter-regional perspective.

We, the participants in the *UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the Europe Region*, thank the organizers of the Forum, in particular UNESCO-CEPES and the Government of Romania. We found the *Forum* an effective and relevant platform to update the our ideas about the state of higher education in the Europe Region as well as to present, discuss and affirm the most effective and efficient ways of furthering higher education in the service of society.

Bucharest, 23 May 2009.