



## **Sarajevo Conclusions: building capacity to change**

**Sarajevo Conference on Higher Education  
Building Capacity for Change in the Western Balkans Region  
30 -31 October, 2009**

On 30 and 31 October 2009, on the invitation of the Universities of Sarajevo, Novi Sad and Zagreb and under the auspices of the Regional Cooperation Council, participants from European higher education institutions and public authorities gathered for a conference to take forward the recommendations of the Novi Sad Initiative launched in 2005, and further developed in Dubrovnik in 2007.

The Sarajevo Conference was the third major event focusing on regional development and cooperation in higher education in a matter of days, following the Council of Europe fifth Informal Meeting of Ministers from the Western Balkans (Ljubljana, 20 - 21 October 2009) and the World Bank Conference in Budva, Montenegro on the topic of Financing Higher Education at a Time of Economic Crisis (29 – 30 October 2009). Participants welcomed this heightened attention to regional cooperation as a sign of the vital importance of taking concrete action to address difficult realities in all countries in the region, and formulated these conclusions to complement the outcomes of these two other events.

All countries are currently facing the impact of economic crisis. In these difficult times, it is more vital than ever that effective investment into education systems is sustained and improved, as such investment now is the only path to future prosperity. Participants agreed that the region, with its strong educational traditions, can again build up strong education systems to support and sustain a positive future. Attention should be paid, however, to developing excellence across the whole spectrum of institutions and their corresponding missions in the education system – from early childhood education to adult education. Countries should not be distracted by developments such as the recent focus on international rankings that look in isolation at elite institutions and neglect the importance of well-functioning education systems that support all individuals to fulfill their potential.

In Ljubljana, the Ministers focused their recommendations on cooperation in key aspects of the Bologna process – notably Quality Assurance, National Qualifications Frameworks and Mobility. The Novi Sad Initiative is also concerned that the Bologna Process action lines are implemented in a manner that aids positive developments in higher education systems in the region. For this to occur, several pre-conditions need to be fulfilled, and attention paid to the following issues that prevent effective and coherent implementation of Bologna reforms:

- **Lack of societal debate on education policy.** Education is crucial to the future for all citizens in the region, and it is therefore a matter of extreme importance to draw attention to the quality of public information and engagement on education. A particularly weak aspect is involvement of employers in discussion of educational programmes and outcomes.
- **Lack of stakeholder participation in decision-making.** Stakeholder involvement in all levels of decision-making is essential, yet is far from being the norm in countries in the region. In particular the lack of student participation in higher education decision-making is to be deplored. This is a matter that requires new practices and attitudinal change. For its part, the Novi Sad Initiative pledges to set a positive example by ensuring that all actions that take place under its umbrella will involve students both in their conception and implementation.
- **Lack of university autonomy.** Faculty autonomy for all matters including rising and spending fee income creates unbalanced universities, distorts attempts to plan coherent higher education provision, and is unhealthy for society. The Declaration of the Novi Sad Initiative ([www.nsinitiative.ns.ac.yu](http://www.nsinitiative.ns.ac.yu)) provides an alternative vision of institutional autonomy – enabling universities to function with the necessary freedom to develop and respond to their public mission. It is this concept that should be the aim of sustained reform efforts.
- **Lack of professional administration in higher education.** Without effective administrative support structures, policy implementation and quality improvement is impossible. Yet key administrative roles are still undervalued and neglected. The following categories of administrative staff in particular require ongoing and high quality training:
  - **Ministerial staff:** the culture in the region is for governmental change to be accompanied by sweeping changes in Ministerial staff. This prevents the sustained development of the expertise required for Governments to bring about positive long-term development of education systems.
  - **Staff in higher education agencies:** in a number of countries, agencies dealing with matters such as external quality assurance, recognition or other policy priorities have recently been established. For such agencies to function with optimal impact, staff should receive training to maintain a high level of professional expertise, and be fully aware of developments both in the region and more widely in Europe.
  - **Staff in national higher education associations:** the absence of many national Rectors' Conferences in the work of the main European associations – for example the European University Association (EUA) – is symptomatic of a major problem. If the region's higher education communities are to engage fully in shaping the European Higher Education Area, rather than simply following its policy agenda, it is vital that such key bodies are strengthened at the national and regional level, so that they can also play their role at the European level. This requires having qualified and professional staff in place, besides the necessary commitment from the university leadership.

To address these issues, **the Sarajevo Conference recommends that a range of concrete actions should be developed and pursued in response to the evident needs for regional cooperation, and taking advantage of the current momentum to pursue urgently needed institutional reform.** The role of the Regional Cooperation Council and the ERI SEE initiative should be maximized in such activities, with a steering group established to guide and monitor progress.

These Sarajevo Conclusions do not aim to restrict measures to a list, but make some suggestions for initial consideration. Human resource training programmes for administrative staff – including summer schools and regional seminars - are a natural area where regional cooperation can be effective. In many areas of academic cooperation, including the development and use of educational materials, the development of new programmes, particularly at doctoral level, existing cooperation throughout the region could and should also be strengthened. Common policy aims – such as developing national qualifications frameworks and external quality assurance agencies, can also benefit from reinforced cooperation at regional level. In particular, the inter-governmental organisations, agencies and funders (TEMPUS, RCC, ERI SEE, SPARK, EAIE, etc) working towards education reform and enhancement in the region should share and disseminate project results and cooperate, cross-region, in the formulation of new projects, and should enjoy the support of inter-governmental cooperation.

Mobility within the region – for both students and staff - should also become a normal feature of academic life, paving the way for more developed mobility with other regions. Countries in the region should not be afraid of opening up opportunities for mobility to and from other parts of the world. While brain drain may be an understandable short-term fear, the most effective means of addressing this fear is by creating the conditions whereby citizens from within and outside the region wish to live, study and work there.

The recommendations for such actions are made in full awareness that public financing for higher education is under severe pressure as a result of the economic crisis, and that the case for additional investment in higher education needs to be underpinned by strong arguments and concrete proposals. Indeed public money currently receives often a poor return in terms of graduation rates, and much international funding has already been invested in the region without yet achieving sustainable outcomes. The conference is convinced that close regional cooperation at Ministerial and University level is required for this significant investment to bear fruit and deliver a high quality and efficient Higher Education system in the region, reducing the requirement for extensive additional public funding

Thus the Sarajevo Conference strongly recommends that by **targeting additional financing on sustainable cross-region reform measures, the overall efficiency of funding will be greatly enhanced, and both the quality of higher education and the prosperity and quality of life in the region will steadily improve.**