

Opening address

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'Introduction to the Conference Theme'

Novi Sad Initiative - Building Capacity for Change in WB Region

The Sarajevo Conference on Higher Education 2009 is the third in the series of biannual conferences on higher education aiming to support reform of Higher Education institutions in the Western Balkan region and to explore the possibility for collective convergence of the region to EHEA and EU policy in higher education.

This series of conferences is embedded in a wider context now called 'Novi Sad Initiative'. This initiative evolved from the European experts' seminar on institutional reform which took place in Novi Sad on October, 2005. After the follow up Conference in Dubrovnik, two years later, the Novi Sad Initiative became a process with a series of biannual conferences and envisaged steering group for monitoring the process between events.

'Novi Sad Initiative' tackles the hardest issue in higher education reform in the region, the issue of reform of higher education institutions, which has not been included in Bologna agenda so far. The purpose of the Initiative is to involve all parties in the region with responsibility in higher education in the reform process and to provide assistance from international organizations and individual EU and Regional experts, and to build on examples of best practice from other parts of Europe.

There are two major phases in the realisation of the Novi Sad Initiative:

Preliminary phase (2005 - 2010) includes organisation of three conferences on higher education institutional reform (Novi Sad in 2005, Dubrovnik in 2007 and Sarajevo in 2009) and organisation of two credit rated summer schools on higher education (London in July 2010 and Dubrovnik in September 2010) and establishment of a monitoring expert's group to provide a continuous evaluation of the reform process in the region between two biannual conferences and to assist in the reform processes in the Region.

Mature phase of the Novi Sad Initiative (2011 - 2015) will include drafting of a comprehensive report on the state-of-the-art of the higher education macro structure and policy in WB region, drafting and adopting of regional higher education policy paper, implementation of the policy paper through several task-force groups, organisation of a series of training courses and summer

schools for higher education policy maker and administrators from the WB region, establishment of a Regional Training and Documentation Centre, and organisation of next three biannual conferences (Tirana in 2011, Skopje or Podgorica in 2013 and Novi Sad in October 2015).

The document: Novi Sad Initiative - Building Capacity for Change in WB Region, along with conclusions of the previous two events which took place in Novi Sad and Dubrovnik, are enclosed as background Conference documents.

Higher education as the best investments for the future

Higher education in the Western Balkan region has always been one of the rear sectors capable to successfully compete on the European scene. The importance of the investment in higher education becomes more evident in the dawn of the forthcoming knowledge based society, for which higher education serves as one of the main pillars.

An inherent part in the course of creation of the knowledge based society in Europe and some neighbouring countries is so called Bologna agenda. Since all Western Balkan countries have been (are) embarked in the Bologna train, this could be a good opportunity offered very rarely to participate from the very beginning in the restructuring and harmonisation of the higher education system in a global scale together with developed EU countries.

Moreover we are currently at the cutting edge of a dramatic change in technology where the science, as a genuine, vibrant part of higher education, pushes forward, towards new developments.

Underdeveloped countries and countries which do not belong to the forefront of contemporary technology development now have unique chance to catch up the train and make a fresh start together with the technologically advanced countries ... and this is again an opportunity offered only few times in the millennium time. This is a clear opportunity for the countries from the Western Balkan region, but it requires change in the national strategic plans and provision of all possible efforts in advancing higher education.

Thus, beside Bologna agenda the technology issue should be another reason for the governments in the Western Balkan countries to focus on higher education in a substantial and sincere way.

The future has already begun along with the race for ensuring new positions. The only way to get membership in the new club would be a substantial investment in higher education both from the point of funding and from the point of providing an incentive legal and structural environment which will

enable further strategic evolution of higher education ... and this brings us to the main points to be discussed at this Conference which would be

- Increase and diversification of funding for higher education
- professionalisation of the public management and administration of higher education
- regional cooperation through various EU platforms

Increase and diversification of funding for higher education

Higher education needs to be properly funded. Outside legal matters money is the main mechanism used by the state to control higher education. There must be instruments in the higher education system to limit direct political involvement in higher education institutions and prevent an inappropriate use of the power of the purse to constrain academic freedom and self-regulation.

It is also clear that in future higher education are to be supported increasingly by private funding, from business, endowment, and third stream activity, and for these reasons governments in the region should continue to amend higher education legislation to make it possible. In the same time it is important that the hard won autonomy from the state is not replaced by limitations imposed by private finance. A new form of buffer might be needed through good governance to effect this.

So. investing in higher education along with safeguarding the autonomy of higher education institutions is the best strategy for future.

Professionalisation of the public management and administration of higher education

Governments in the region should continue to amend higher education legislation in order to professionalise public management of higher education, for example through the creation of competent intermediary bodies for specific tasks, such as funding, research management and quality assurance.

Higher education legislation also needs to be amended to provide separation of functions, ensuring that governments focus on setting national policy while other institutions like buffer institutions deliver such policies and ensure long term strategic planning of the higher education system;

As a part of the professionalisation of the public management of higher education, policy makers and administrators from ministries and universities have to be properly trained.

Building capacity for change in higher education is the prerequisite for the substantial institutional reform.

Regional cooperation through various EU platforms

Besides being neighbours, there are at least two major reasons why Western Balkan countries have to cooperate in the higher education reform. Firstly, most of the Western Balkan countries inherited similar higher education systems which in the meantime evolved in different directions but still not substantially. Secondly, all Western Balkan countries are headed towards European higher education policy.

The exchange of experience in developing higher education systems in the regions could be intensified by using the advantage the cultural diversity in a region to build up the European convergence of countries/universities in the area.

A number of EU platforms, like TEMPUS Programme, could be used in order to accelerate the collective convergence of the Region towards EU policy in higher education including drafting an embryo of joint policy in higher education.