

The Dubrovnik Recommendations: pursuing regional and European cooperation

On 29 – 31 October, participants from European higher education institutions and public authorities gathered in Dubrovnik *at the invitation* of the Universities of Zagreb, Novi Sad, and Vienna, to examine the challenges of Central and South Eastern European countries in creating a European Higher Education area and in particular the reforms needed in the institutions that govern higher education. The Conference built upon the outcomes of the International Seminar on Higher Education held in Novi Sad in 28 – 30 October 2005 now known as the Novi Sad Initiative.

The Conference has been *strongly supported* by the following international organisations, national higher education authorities and non governmental associations: the Council of Europe, Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, European University Association, UNESCO-CEPES, European Students Union, Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, Irish Higher Education Authority, Turkish Council of Higher Education, Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Serbian Ministry of Education and Secretariat for Education and Culture Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) and SPARK.

The participants firstly wish *to endorse fully the Novi Sad conclusions adopted in 2005*. Rather than restate or update the principles and general action lines outlined in that document, the challenge now is to identify specific priorities and concrete actions, and to ensure a strategy for implementation.

The participants also wish *to reaffirm the outcomes of the EUA Vienna Seminar 2006* on strengthening higher education and research in South East Europe, in particular part 3 devoted to institutional reform and development, emphasising the need for providing incentives for higher education reform and the integration of universities into single legal entities.

The Conference also identified a need for action to professionalise the public management and administration of higher education – both within universities and also within ministries by bringing updated knowledge of higher education topics and challenges closer to the higher education administrators in the institutions that govern higher education. **The participating universities pledge to address this issue by cooperating in the development of regional programmes and summer schools for higher education administrators**, also taking into account and building upon existing networks of cooperation.

Since 2005, considerable progress has been made, albeit at different speeds in the different institutions and countries in the region. Participants welcome this progress, but also underline that **efforts need to be stepped up if the benefits of regional cooperation are to be realised in all countries**.

The participants also emphasise the critical role of students in developing higher education in the region. Student participation in university governance and policy debate should be considered as an essential element of positive and healthy higher education development. As a practical step, **the Conference recommends that every future national and regional inter-university meeting should ensure that students are represented in delegations**.

There was clearly strong agreement about the importance of student involvement in European higher education governance - although with different views about how this can best be taken forward and therefore it may be important to focus on the role of student unions in the region/Europe in a future meeting.

All countries in the region are becoming increasingly active and engaged in the Bologna process, but much more could and should be done to ensure positive development. **The Conference encourages all universities to exploit the opportunities for institutional development and regional cooperation through European programmes supporting higher education.** One major concern for the future is that university research capacity is weak, and conditions do not exist to develop the talent pool in the region, or to attract talented researchers from other parts of the world. While the EU Framework programmes offer some new opportunities, the Conference also called for support to establish a Regional Research Fund particularly addressed at early stage researchers, and using a competitive funding model as an incentive in creation of a variety of attractive regional centres of excellence. **A particular ambition should be to concentrate on developing diverse university strengths in the region,** along with a frame for the quality in diversity.

The participants recognise that regional cooperation is only possible if greater mobility opportunities are facilitated not only in Europe and the rest of the world, but also within the region. The Conference called on governments and universities in the region to take responsibility for developing and encouraging mobility opportunities for students, researchers and professors through **providing incentives for cooperation, developing joint programmes, and encouraging academic cooperation and networking.**

The Dubrovnik Conference was launched to address a set of issues that are crucial to the implementation of the European Higher Education Area, and to promote more effective regional cooperation. **The Final Recommendation calls therefore for a strong and renewed effort to speed up the process of institutional reforms, by rethinking the role of governments in providing incentives for higher education reform, professionalising the public management of higher education, integrating university into single legal entity and thus encouraging trust in institutions.** Competent intermediary bodies may be set up for specific tasks, such as funding, research management and quality assurance along with non-political national boards of trustees with responsibilities prescribed by law, having members nominated by several stakeholders (government, universities, industry, etc). **Higher Education legislation should also be amended to support such a policy approach.**

These issues cannot all be resolved in the next two years, and the dialogue needs to continue. This may be realised by biannual conferences to follow up the initiatives of the 2005 Novi Sad Conference and the 2007 Dubrovnik Conference, to bring the process of higher education institutional reform to the attention of the political and academic leadership of Europe. In order to ensure continuity and monitor the reform process between two biannual events consultations will be taken in the course of creation of a steering body.