



**Regional University Network
on Governance and Management
of Higher Education in South East Europe**



EUA

**UNESCO-CEPES / European University Association (EUA)
Conference on
“The External Dimension of the Bologna Process:
South-East European Higher Education and the European Higher
Education Area in a Global World”**

Bucharest, Romania, 6 - 8 March 2003

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Background

The participants in the UNESCO-CEPES/EUA Conference, organized within the framework of the Project “Regional University Network of Governance and Management of Higher Education in South East Europe (SEE)¹”, explored the following topics:

- i) challenges and opportunities facing higher education systems and institutions participating in the project² in the context of the Bologna Process;
- ii) challenges to academic values and to the organization of academic work at a time of increasing globalization;
- iii) higher education as a public good and its significance for higher education in the region;
- iv) quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications as regulatory mechanisms in the European Higher Education Area

in the context of the applications of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro to join the Bologna Process, bearing in mind the letters sent by the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG)³ inviting applicant countries to review their achievements so far and set out their plans in relation to the objectives of the Bologna Declaration and the Prague Communiqué.

2. Progress so far: Achievements and Shortcomings

2.1. The applications of the above mentioned countries⁴ to join the Bologna Process formally reflect their clear and strong commitment to achieving the Bologna Process objectives. Experience in the EC / UNESCO-CEPES Project on «Regional University Network on Governance and Management of Higher Education in SEE» has demonstrated that those responsible for higher education in these countries have already used the provisions of the Bologna Declaration and the Prague Communiqué as a **reference framework for their reform initiatives**. There is evidence of a growing mobilisation in this direction at the level of national authorities and institutions, as well as among the academic community and students. The goals are to improve transparency and to reaching an increased convergence between higher education systems in the region and those of the Bologna Process signatory states. The key issues are as follows:

2.2. University autonomy is now legally protected in all the countries concerned and the practical implementation of this essential element is also improving. The values of academic freedom are highly regarded and embedded in everyday academic work. However, in terms of **governance**, particularly regarding the importance of ensuring accountability towards stakeholders, there are still many issues to be addressed. The current organization of universities as weak federations of legally autonomous faculties hinders the effective implementation of the objectives of the Bologna Process. Academic management and administration are still underdeveloped. Although

¹ The project is supported by the European Commission in the framework of the CARDS Programme

² Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia.

³ Participants from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro informed the conference that the letters had not been received by their Ministries

⁴ Croatia joined the process officially in 2001.

students have a formal role in institutional governance bodies, they are, in practice, in many cases not actively involved.

2.3. Quality assurance has become a key challenge for national authorities and institutions across the region. Almost all countries are in the process of establishing national agencies in charge of quality evaluation and accreditation. The evaluation of study programmes and institutions includes internal assessments and external reviewing. To promote the development of a quality culture at institutional level, 10 universities of the region are elaborating detailed strategic plans within the Project. Given the small size of the respective higher education systems, the introduction of more systematic and effective institutional quality assurance mechanisms, including a wider European dimension, becomes ever more important. Where a decision is taken to establish national agencies of quality evaluation and accreditation they need to be properly resourced.

2.4. Two-tier structure. The two tier structure is the dominant structure in most of the region's universities. However, curricula have not been restructured and the duration of studies for a bachelor degree is longer than intended in the Bologna Process. In addition, the master level tends to be simply added to the previous level, once again without reflecting upon the restructuring of curricula. Despite high interest, there is as yet little evidence of the introduction of joint study programmes as a means of developing sustainable inter-institutional European partnerships.

2.5. Study credits. A considerable effort has been made to introduce study credits, particularly ECTS, in all countries. However, the gap between theory and practice is still wide. Credits are not easily transferable, nor are they cumulative. A combination of old and new practices of curriculum organization exist side by side. HEI are encouraged to introduce ECTC both transfer and accumulation. Higher education institutions are encouraged to introduce widely ECTS for transfer and accumulation.

2.6. Academic mobility. Compared to the past, academic mobility has increased dramatically, despite obstacles encountered both by staff and students, particularly related to visa requirements and the availability of financial resources. The level of outgoing mobility is much higher than that of incoming, and many of the best students and graduates do not return after their study abroad period, thus contributing to brain drain from the region. In the future it will be important to support further mobility of staff and students while at the same time providing incentives for the best to return home, for example through the improvement of working conditions of young researchers.

2.7. Readable and comparable degrees. There are still difficulties with the recognition of qualifications and periods of study both internally between the countries in the region, and in relation to Bologna signatory countries. Participants encouraged countries that have not yet ratified the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention (i.e. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro) to do so as soon as possible. They also encourage all institutions in the region to make full use of the Diploma Supplement.

3. Full participation in the Bologna Process: recommendations

3.1. Participants welcomed the opportunity provided by the Conference of promoting debate and exchange of experience between representatives of the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) and of the various applicant countries from the region. Through the reform activities already undertaken at national and institutional level they have clearly demonstrated and reiterated their commitment to joining the Bologna Process, and to implementing its provisions progressively. **Participants recommend that the Ministers meeting in Berlin in September 2003 take this into**

consideration and welcome all four applicants from the region as full members in the Bologna Process.

3.2 At the same time, the results of the analysis of the TRENDS III data as well as the case study analysis presented on progress in curricular reform, demonstrate that much remains to be done to consolidate the position of higher education in South East Europe in the emerging European Higher Education Area. Participants identified key challenges and priority areas for further action as set out above and in the following paragraphs.

4. Facing the challenges of globalization

4.1. The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is taking place in parallel to a process of increasing **globalisation of higher education**. The education systems of South East Europe are at present outside the EHEA and thus are choosing to express their commitment to Europe at the same time as having to function in an increasingly global environment. In the wider context of the globalization of higher education, emphasis was put on its impact on academic values and on the organisation of academic work, including the relationship between faculties and departments, the role of the different academic actors and the nature of the organisational structure.

4.2. The key challenge for South East Europe was recognised as being that **of articulating the voice of the region in this framework, of being proactive, and particularly of preparing students to deal with global issues** through adequate analysis and investigation. The need to cope with uncertainties was underlined, as well as the importance of promoting change while at the same time preserving core academic values. Attention was drawn to the importance of diversification, the need to develop alternative forms of provision, and to promote lifelong learning.

4.3. Participants recognized that the debate on higher education as a public good is multifaceted and includes economic, legal and normative-political dimensions. At the same time they stressed the need for moving on to a discussion focused on **the responsibility of the public authorities for higher education, who, together with the different actors in the higher education system, should, among other things, define objectives and establish the framework for higher education.**

4.4. The dilemma facing the countries of the region was recognized to be that of coping with the consequences of accepting public responsibility for higher education - in terms of the challenges of supporting a system ensuring equity and equal access for all according to merit, and high quality of provision - at a time of strictly limited state budgets, multiple and growing funding demands and recent large increases in higher education participation rates across the region. There is a need for **further investigation of the different possible models of funding higher education systems**, taking into consideration growing competitiveness in the emerging European Higher Education Area where sustainable levels of excellence are a prerequisite.

4.5. For the EHEA and in the context of globalization participants agreed that questions of quality assurance, accreditation and recognition are at the centre of the debate. **For higher education systems in SEE the issues of quality assurance, accreditation and recognition are key to reform.** The interlinkage of the three elements should lead to the development of an institutional quality culture in the region going beyond the introduction of simple quality management and control mechanisms. Institutions are encouraged to strengthen their European networking activities in this field and fledgling national agencies to work together with the European Network of National Quality Agencies (ENQA). Countries that have not yet established an ENIC should do so as soon as possible.

5. Participants expressed thanks to UNESCO/CEPES and the European University Association (EUA) for organising the conference as well to other partners for their support, and underlined the importance of the organisation of follow-up activities in support of higher education reform and development in South East Europe.

Bucharest, 8th March 2003