



MESSAGE FROM THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE TO THE MEETING OF MINISTERS OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Bergen, 19 – 20 May 2005

In June 1999, Ministers of Education of 29 European countries promised to establish a European Higher Education Area by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. This promise was no less bold than that made by President Kennedy almost forty years earlier to send a man to the moon within a decade and bring him safely home again. Today, half way to 2010, the contours of the European Higher Education Area are emerging. While much remains to be done, the progress made so far bears witness to the fact that with continued commitment and hard work, its goals are within reach. The Council of Europe attaches particular importance to a European Higher Education Area based on the basic values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and European citizenship, and we are committed to continuing our contributions to the Bologna Process. We recall that academic cooperation has often served to build confidence and to open doors for wider political relations.

A truly European area

As Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe's member states gather in Warsaw for their Third Summit, and as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of European cultural cooperation, we are particularly pleased that the European Higher Education Area has become truly European. It has expanded from its original configuration of 29 countries organized around the European Union programmes to today's 45 countries united through the European Cultural Convention. The Council of Europe welcomes the accession of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to the Bologna Process, and we renew our particular commitment to assisting the newer members of the Bologna Process as well as other countries that may be in particular need of sharing the experience of others on their way to the European Higher Education Area. We take satisfaction in the overall results of the stocktaking carried out for the Bergen conference and also note that it helps identify areas where further work is needed.

The European Higher Education Area is now almost complete in its geographical composition, and the Council of Europe entertains the hope that the political situation in Belarus will one day make it possible for the higher education community of this country, today deprived of its democratic rights, to take its rightful place in this important European construction.

The European Higher Education Area must remain open to other parts of the world. Indeed, if it is not, it cannot reach its goal of being attractive. On the basis of the wide ranging reforms of the Bologna Process, we must engage in constructive cooperation with all regions of the world. Europe has a right to expect fair recognition of the real value of its higher education and research, and it must extend such recognition to the achievements of other regions. The emphasis on learning outcomes – what learners know and can do with their qualifications – rather than on the formal procedures through which these qualifications have been earned must be applied to our relations with all regions.

The Council of Europe commits to working to improve cooperation between European higher education and other regions of the world, in particular in the Mediterranean region, with our neighbours in Central Asia and with the Council's observer states Canada, Japan, Mexico and the United States. We will seek to do so in partnership with UNESCO, the European Commission and others, and with the conviction that higher education is a vital part of one of our main priorities: intercultural dialogue and co-operation.

An area of substance

To become a reality, the European Higher Education Area must build on substantial achievements. The Council of Europe is pleased to note the impressive achievements of content since 1999, and we are proud of our contribution to making higher education reform a pan-European reality.

The European Higher Education Area must build on the public responsibility for higher education and research that is an integral part of our common academic heritage and that has twice been underlined by European Ministers responsible for Higher Education. To be a reality, however, the ways in which public authorities exercise their responsibility must be adapted to the realities of modern, complex societies. The exclusive public responsibility for the framework of higher education, such as legislation and degree systems, must be matched by strong public commitment to equal opportunities and to financing higher education and research, and it must make room for the valuable contributions of other parts of society, including the private sector, within this overall framework set by public authorities.

In 2004, the Council of Europe sought to launch the debate on the public responsibility for higher education through a major conference at our Strasbourg headquarters. It is our hope that the recommendations from the conference as well as the new publication made available to you at the Bergen meeting will help make the public responsibility for higher education and research a cornerstone of the European Higher Education Area.

We will continue to contribute to the development of higher education policies and reform in Europe through our Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research, through the publications of our recently launched Council of Europe Higher Education Series and through our new, annual Council of Europe Higher Education Forum, the first of which will deal with higher education governance.

Of all the areas singled out for stocktaking, ratification of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention proved to be the one for which achievements were greatest. We take pride in this, but we also see the results of the stocktaking as an encouragement to continue our efforts in implementing this Convention so that all learners may obtain fair recognition and benefit from the full value of their qualifications throughout the European Higher Education Area. We are fully aware that the success of any legal text is determined by its implementation. This will also be the ultimate measure of success of the European Higher Education Area.

The Council of Europe's pioneering activities in the area of recognition naturally lead us to take up the challenges of quality assurance. We welcome the proposed standards for quality assurance and insist on the importance of making the results of quality assurance publicly available so that learners can make their choices of programmes and institutions on a well founded basis. Transparent and reliable information on the quality of higher education is also vital to employers, recognition specialties and others who need to assess qualifications.

The development of an overarching qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area as well as of compatible national frameworks is of the utmost importance to providing learners with real opportunities to move between qualifications within a single system as well as to move between education systems throughout Europe. The Council of Europe contributed substantially to the elaboration of the overarching framework for the European Higher Education Area, and we are ready to organize expertise for countries in need of advice in the development of their national frameworks as well as to help the further development of recognition practice to take full account of the opportunities offered by qualifications frameworks.

In keeping with the Council of Europe's commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and as an integral part of 2005 as the European year of Citizenship through Education, our contributions to the Bologna Process also emphasize higher education governance built on the participation of all groups, the development and maintenance of the basic values of Europe's university heritage and the recognition that higher education and research are vital to the sustainable development of European societies.

An area of further challenges

We can rightly be proud of the substantial achievements of the Bologna Process, but we must at the same time be realistic about the serious challenges ahead.

The European Higher Education Area opens opportunities for mobility, intercultural experience and the further development of knowledge and learning throughout our continent that recent generations of Europeans could only dream of. To make the dreams come true for all Europeans, however, will require adding sustained efforts to develop the social dimension of higher education to those that have been undertaken in the area of structural reform.

A European Higher Education Area cannot aim at less than equal opportunities for all its members. It cannot aim at less than being a socially cohesive area in which all individuals have the opportunity to fully develop their abilities and their potential. Our societies cannot afford to do less than give all Europeans the opportunity to put their abilities, skills and knowledge at the service of others.

To achieve the full potential of the European Higher Education Area requires intense further work on higher education policies. It also requires, however, that we go beyond the present boundaries of the higher education sector. Inevitably, higher education policies will come to interact with other areas of public policy, and we cannot complete the European Higher Education Area if we do not rise to this challenge. The most obvious example is that mobility of students, staff and graduates throughout Europe cannot be achieved if we do not have the courage to address the difficult issues of visas, work permits and the portability of social security rights. We cannot seriously pretend to aim at increasing and facilitating academic mobility if we are not prepared to reconsider immigration rules that for too many learners make such mobility close to impossible in practice.

The Council of Europe will continue its contributions to the most wide ranging higher education reforms that Europe has seen. It will do so on the basis of our European values and with the conviction that higher education and research are vital to Europe's future.

The ultimate measure of the success of the European Higher Education Area will be that it enables students, staff and graduates to move freely throughout Europe, that it engages constructively with the rest of the world and that its policies enable higher education and research to fulfil its major purposes:

- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic society;
- preparation for sustainable employability;
- personal development;
- the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base.