

# **WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

## **Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century**

### **Vision and Action**

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Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

Note2: Authors are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in signed articles and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

**Speech of Dr Jaroslav KALOUS\***  
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A change of century engenders a feeling among people of being at a crossroads. Although the historical experience is for obvious reasons more limited, it is natural to assume that a change of millennium can only reinforce this feeling of monumental change. It is certainly a feeling present in large parts of the world of higher education today, and the feeling does not only have to do with dates. Much more, it has to do with developments in the mission of higher education, in its relation to the society of which higher education is a part – although it is sometimes thought of as apart – in the knowledge available to us and in the possibilities for contacts among institutions and individual students and staff in spite of geographical distance or cultural or political differences.

I will not pretend to address all the burning issues of higher education in a complete manner. Rather, I would like to point to elements in the Council of Europe programme where we may make a contribution to the concerns of the World Conference.

I am glad to acknowledge Council of Europe participation in the preparation of the World Conference. Institutionally, this was done through a meeting organized by the French National Commission for UNESCO in association with the Council of Europe and UNESCO and held at Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg on 2-3 July 1998. The conference, which was a part of the European preparations for the World Conference, concentrated on two themes central to the Council of Europe's current higher education programme: lifelong learning and the role of universities in research. The Council of Europe was also present at the Palermo conference, which was the main European preparation for the World Conference. Members of our Higher Education and Research Committee (CC-HER) have participated in the various preparatory activities as national delegates, and many of them are indeed present at the World Conference. These includes the Chair of the Higher Education and Research Committee, Professor Suzy Halimi of France, as well as members of the CC-HER Bureau.

The World Conference provides a platform to which we as a European organisation certainly have a contribution to make, but also a forum in which we have much to learn from the contributions of other parts of the world. The Council of Europe co-operates very closely with UNESCO on the European higher education scene. In the case of mobility and recognition issues, this cooperation extends to a truly joint activity and a joint legal text. I know of no other similar cooperation between two intergovernmental organisations in the education field.

### **Relevance**

As stated in several of the conference documents, higher education is in search of relevance. This is nothing new. Universities were founded and developed not primarily as philanthropic enterprises but as institutions whose aim it was to provide society with a specific kind of high level competence. As society has developed, so has the need for high level competence and therefore the demands on the higher education system. What is new is therefore less the quest for relevance than the definition of what relevance is. A modern, complex society needs high level competence in a wide range of academic areas, and it needs to continually update this competence. Important as the economic and immediately utilitarian perspective is, higher education also has an important cultural mission which is no less relevant to modern, complex societies.

The need to continually update knowledge and competence cannot be met if higher education is still thought of as a once in a lifetime experience. This has profound implications. Higher education institutions must be able to provide students with a sound initial education, but also be places to which highly educated people come back to renew their professional and cultural competence.

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The CC-HER is launching a new project on *Lifelong Learning for Equity and Social Cohesion: a New Challenge to Higher Education*. The project will include work on the redefinition of the mission of the university in lifelong learning, on meeting the demands of a changing student population, on structures and qualifications and not least on the applications of new technologies in lifelong learning, providing a direct link to the follow-up to the Second Summit of the Council of Europe, held in October 1997. We would very much welcome the participation of UNESCO in this new project.

The Lifelong Learning Project is in a way a natural sequel to another CC-HER project which was completed in 1996 – *Access to Higher Education in Europe*. Both projects meet one of the key concerns of the World Conference: that of offering all qualified persons the opportunity to benefit from higher education. Equality of opportunity, non-discrimination and respect for the worth and dignity of each individual is also very much in line with the priorities of the Council of Europe. The Access Project was also concerned with taking a fresh look at the meaning of the term “qualified”. Opportunities for qualifying for higher education should be extended to those who have not reached the required educational level, not for lack of talent but for lack of opportunities. The Access Project gave rise to a political recommendation as well as to a compendium of examples of good practice which could be a valuable source of inspiration for both institutions and countries.

Linked to both the questions of lifelong learning and access is the role of the teacher, which is changing rapidly and is generally seen to be more demanding today than it was only ten or fifteen years ago. The reasons are many. They have to do, among other things, with an increasing diversification in the student population, with a quite dramatic increase in the sum of knowledge as well as in the part of this knowledge seen as relevant for different parts and levels of the formal education system, with the influence of social and economic developments on the life of education institutions, with the developments of new technologies and with several other factors. Many more people now expect more from formal education, which is no longer seen as a preserve of the middle class. In part, this may be because a solid formal education is seen as central both to career possibilities and the quality of life. At the same time, education has to compete for attention with many other strong influences, in particular the media. Youth culture is in many ways distinguished from the culture of other age groups, and this distinctiveness is probably more accentuated than before. Three characteristics of youth culture are its international orientation (at least in the sense of absorbing the youth culture of certain areas, notably the English speaking countries), and thus in a certain sense its uniformity, its defiance of and resistance to authority and its individualism.

Education is a central element of social and employment policy as well as of cultural policy. At the same time, the teaching profession is – or at least runs the risk of being – isolated from the society for which education prepares. Teaching is perceived as a life long career, but teachers – and many outsiders – consider the possibilities of further education and update of skills as inadequate. The Council of Europe is looking at the possibilities of launching a new project on the new role of the teacher. The project will consider all levels of education and be carried out by the CC-HER and the Education Committee together.

## **Reform**

The issue of relevance has also been addressed from a quite different angle by our Higher Education and Research Committee, from an angle bordering on the issues of quality and management, which are also on the agenda of this World Conference. It is not only the individual higher education institution which must be relevant. The framework which governs higher education must also be relevant and up to date. It must foster higher education and research rather than hinder them. After the important political changes around 1990, which made it possible to include a large number of new partner countries in the Council of Europe’s work on education and culture, it was clear that the legal framework which governed higher education in most of these new partner countries was in urgent need of repair.

In response, the Council of Europe launched the *Legislative Reform Programme* in higher education and research. A number of factors are unusual about this programme. First of all, it was initiated at the request of a number of Central and Eastern European countries, which put legislative reform at the top of their agenda.

Secondly, the Programme was construed as an offer, and in no way as an obligation. All countries were free to benefit from the programme; none was obliged to do so. The programme operates on the basis of

requests from countries wanting advice. In the early days, the Programme was able to accommodate just about all requests. It now concentrates on the Council of Europe's priority areas like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Russia, Ukraine and the Caucasian republics, although it is able to maintain a lower level of activity in some other areas.

Thirdly, the Programme offers advice by experts with wide experience of higher education policy making, both at institutional and governmental level. Experts have been drawn from a large variety of national and institutional backgrounds, and the Programme has made a point of showing the variety of European experiences rather than trying to offer one model as *the* solution. In the early stages, all experts came from the older member countries, but now the Programme also draws on the experience of new member states which have gone through their first phase of legislative reform. The decision, however, lies with the country asking for advice – it can take it, modify it or leave it. The law making process is the prerogative of national authorities. The Legislative Reform Programme offers a window to a broad international experience, but how to use and adapt that experience to local circumstances is up to the country concerned.

Fourthly, the Programme is largely run on voluntary contributions, although the Council of Europe also contributes from its ordinary budget. The Netherlands and Germany have been our largest contributors, but many countries have contributed at different levels. This year, we have even received the first financial contribution from a Central and Eastern European country – Poland. A new development is also earmarked funding from international organizations such as the World Bank for specific actions. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we are establishing a joint action with UNESCO, represented by its Centre for Higher Education in Europe, CEPES, based in Bucharest.

The Legislative Reform Programme will run through 2000. It will leave a legacy of substantial achievements and a platform on which we hope to build a more broadly based technical cooperation activity in all fields of education.

## **Quality**

The quest for quality cannot be divorced from the quest for relevance, at least if there is a measure of truth to the definition of quality as “fitness to purpose”. Quality is a vital concern in many fields, including education. It is also a buzz word which runs the risk of being used so frequently in so many ways that it may lose its meaning and – relevance.

The Council of Europe has been concerned with one specific aspect of the quality issue for a long time, through its work on the recognition of qualifications. It is an area of great importance to education. Certainly, there is little point in talking warmly about the importance of internationalising higher education unless adequate provisions are made for the recognition of qualifications earned abroad. It is also an area in which much progress has been made, yet it is also one in which difficulties remain and some long lived myths persist. The recognition of qualifications is still the responsibility of the competent authorities of the countries concerned, which often means individual higher education institutions and professional bodies. However, the international organisations have an essential role in providing a framework and in developing standards of good practice.

In this area, the Council of Europe and UNESCO are co-operating very closely. The joint Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region was adopted in Lisbon in April 1997 and we hope that it will soon come into force. It is intended that it will eventually simplify the legal framework by replacing 5 current Council of Europe Conventions as well as the UNESCO Convention for the Europe Region. In reality, it already sets the standards for recognition work in Europe. The joint ENIC Network – the European Network of National Information Centres on academic recognition and mobility – will play a major role in the implementation of the Convention. The ENIC Network was established in 1994 by merger of the previously separate Council of Europe and UNESCO Networks, it is served jointly by the Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES, and it will take on a new importance with the Convention, although it already serves as the main forum for the development of good recognition practice in Europe.

The Convention aims at facilitating the recognition of qualifications and clearly states that applicants are entitled to a fair examination of their qualifications within a reasonable time limit and according to transparent, coherent and reliable procedures. It takes as its point of departure that qualifications should

be recognised unless the competent authorities of the host country can show that there is a substantial difference between the qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualifications of the host country. It also makes provisions for the information on the assessment of higher education institutions and programmes, and it strongly emphasises the importance of information on recognition matters and on the implementation of the Convention.

The focus of the Convention is on the recognition of individual qualifications. However, this cannot be done without a consideration of the institution having issued the qualifications. Indeed, the diversification of higher education systems in Europe was an important part of the background for launching work on a new Convention in the first place. National systems for quality control of institutions show a great variety. They range from clear regulations giving a national authority the prerogative of formally recognising an institution to no regulations at all in a free for all system. The Convention recognises this variety of backgrounds, but it places a clear obligation on parties to provide information on the institutions making up its higher education system. This is in some ways a minimum threshold for quality control, but it nonetheless marks an important step forward. We have an obligation to help prospective students find their way through the maze of institutions by making it possible to find clear and factual information. A prospective student should have a right to know whether his or her qualification will be recognised before (s)he embarks on a study programme rather than finding out the hard way after (s)he has invested much time and money in obtaining the qualification.

Let me also underline that while the Convention is an important milestone, it is by no means the end of the road. A legal text is only of value if it is implemented, and both the Council of Europe and UNESCO are committed to doing our utmost.

### **Inter-university cooperation**

Inter-university cooperation is an important area, but also an area in which international organizations have a more limited role than higher education institutions themselves, at least as long as the international organisations have budgets the size of those of the Council of Europe and UNESCO. Nonetheless, we can be facilitators and provide examples of good practice.

I have in mind the conference on *Regional Cooperation in Higher Education* held in Reykjavik in September 1997 and organised jointly by the Council of Europe and the Nordic Council of Ministers. On the basis of a solid background report and good case studies, the conference considered the working methods of regional cooperation and the circumstances in which the particular methods have been applied. I should add that "region" is in this context not used in the UNESCO sense of "continent" but in the sense of cooperation between geographically close areas. Nordic cooperation is a well-established example and was the subject of one of the case studies. The other studies covered Mediterranean cooperation, the Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies (CEEPUS) centred on Austria and neighbouring countries, cooperation between Dutch and bordering German institutions and two cases of cooperation in geographically limited areas: the Upper Rhine and the Pyreneans.

Regional cooperation in this sense is a supplement to, and not a substitute for, broader European and international cooperation. It provides new groups of students and staff with the opportunity to participate in the internationalization of higher education, and it can help build regional economies and identities. In many cases, it may promote the rational use of limited resources, such as when students and staff from the whole region can benefit from the particular competence of one of the institutions in a particular area. In essence, this is the case of the Nordic Agricultural University, which is a network drawing on the particular competencies of the agricultural universities in each of the Nordic countries. The results of the conference provide a good platform and a number of good examples for institutions and authorities which might want to promote new cooperation schemes.

Let me close by stating once again the Council of Europe's deep appreciation of the excellent cooperation we have developed with UNESCO. We look forward to continuing this cooperation and also hope to be able to extend it to new areas. And then we are very grateful to UNESCO for providing platforms like the World Conference, in which our work on the European scene can be placed in the broader context of the world scene. We contribute, and we learn. That is, I believe, the essence of education.