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Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

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Association of European Universities (CRE)

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.

Association of European Universities (CRE)

**Speech of Dr Kenneth Edwards
President of the Association of European Universities**

Mr President,

The Association of European Universities (known generally as CRE - the acronym of its former title) is very pleased to be involved in the World Conference on Higher Education, because the existence of this Conference recognizes the global nature of many of the issues facing higher education as we approach the twentieth century.

The Association has more than 500 members in all parts of Europe - from the Atlantic to the Urals and from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. CRE provides a mechanism for its member universities to share experiences, to identify and disseminate good practices and to prepare guidance on important general issues.

CRE also provides a forum in which the universities of Europe can identify views and concerns which they have in common. The Association can then, in partnership with the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences, represent these views and concerns to relevant organizations which operate on a European scale - such as the Commission of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the European Round Table of Industrialists. Finally, the CRE has many links with other regional associations of Higher Education Institutions across the world, thus creating a global network.

Such a global network is of great significance because many of the challenges facing Higher Education are truly global. Let me identify a few of these:

- The massification of higher education with numbers of young people entering universities and increasing participation of people of all ages in lifelong learning. This market trend towards mass Higher Education reflects both the increased demand from potential students and the recognition of the need of societies for a skilled and well educated population.
- The greater expectations of governments and societies of the contributions which universities can make to the economic, social and cultural development of those societies. Specially these enhanced expectations are manifest on:
 1. The need for a highly skilled workforce
 2. Increasing employability
 3. Research on applied, local issues as well as on basic studies
 4. Contribution to local economic regeneration
 5. Widening access to a much broader intake from all sectors of the population
 6. Contribution to lifelong learning
 7. Involvement in social programmes
 8. Reinforcement of local and national cultural features

So what has CRE been doing in response to these pressures and challenges?

During the past four years, the Association's activities have focused on five major themes:

1) *The restructuring of the university*

The many challenges and opportunities facing the universities are producing many changes in the operation of universities and in their involvement with other stakeholders. The management of such changes places particular and heavy responsibility on the Rector (or President or Vice-Chancellor) and his or her senior colleagues.

CRE has, for about 20 years, been running management seminars for newly appointed Rectors and Vice Rectors to help to prepare them to deal with the change process, which in all cases is requiring universities to reassess their role in the world and to develop a stronger corporate institutional strategy.

Another and specific example of the need to restructure is presented by the need to incorporate new information and communication technologies in the teaching and learning programme. How can these technologies be used in wider access and to develop distance education? How will they lead to new methods of delivering education to campus-based students? Will, indeed, the potential lead to a proliferation of virtual universities, threatening the very existence of the campus university?

CRE has carried out a study amongst its members of the use being made of new information and communication technologies. One clear conclusion was that while there was much experimental activity within individual universities, few universities which we contacted had a clear institutional strategy for the incorporation of the new technologies in their teaching and learning programmes. CRE has now published a document providing guidance on the elements which need to be considered in the development of such a strategy.

2) *Quality evaluation*

The move to mass higher education, accompanied as it has been by constraints - often severe - on the funds available, has led to concern about the maintenance of quality. This concern has been felt both within the universities, which have clear responsibilities for the quality of their academic activities, and also by external stakeholders such as governments and employers.

CRE now runs a highly regarded programme of institutional quality evaluation. An international team of experts visits the university to be evaluated and produces a detailed account of its activities. It provides a detailed report to the university and subsequently keeps in contact to assist the university to consider its response. The process is aimed to help universities to improve themselves in considering their academic quality.

Time constraints prevent me from doing more than mention other themes of activities of CRE. They are:

3) *The financing of the university*

All universities are having to do more with less and the aims of the CRE programmes have been to help universities to develop additional sources of funding and also to help them to manage their finances more effectively and efficiently.

4) *Links with society*

An illustration of this theme is provided by the studies of regional involvement of universities, which was the major topic of the CRE's specific contribution to the World Conference.

5) *The cohesion of Universities*

CRE is very much aware that for certain universities external events can threaten their normal operation or, indeed, their very existence. We have, for example, an important programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina to assist the local universities to recover from the difficulties which they have experienced.

This brief account of the major themes of CRE activity in recent years will, I hope, give you an impression of the role and nature of CRE.

CRE believes that, as a regional organization, it has a very important role in providing a forum for the universities in Europe to share experiences and learn from each other as they respond to the challenges of a knowledge-based global economy and society. We also believe that we should do this with other bodies and organizations around the world to create a global network.

We are convinced that, in this way, we can both ensure the maintenance of the fundamental value of universities and also maximize the contribution which universities can make to societies all over the world as they adapt to the many changes and challenges which face them.