

# **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.

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Community of Mediterranean Universities (CMU)

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**Speech of Professors Luigi Ambrosi, CMU's President  
and Carlo Di Benedetta, CMU's Coordinator of Scientific Secretariat**

**The recognition of studies within the Mediterranean Basin**

Mr President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues,

It is a great privilege to be here and to have the opportunity of addressing our deep thanks and congratulations to the Director-General on convening such an important meeting.

The Community of Mediterranean Universities (CMU) is a network gathering 166 Universities from all the Mediterranean countries. Its goals mainly concern training and research activities. We will limit our considerations to the recognition of diplomas, degrees, titles and courses of study since it is one of the problems which the CMU faces continuously within the teaching activities of its 20 schools. It is not only our concern but it is an issue that other international bodies like UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Union, among others, deem to be very important and many have been the proposals put forward by them in view of finding a possible solution to it.

The recognition of diplomas, degrees, titles and courses of study has become even more crucial in the light of the process of globalization which is, by now, involving all of the human activities and therefore must be applied also to the educational process. The expected globalization of education becomes an essential and qualifying dimension of higher education. The "teaching" networks (specifically devoted to this end) must therefore be based on co-operation, solidarity and equality with regard to both the rights and duties of the trainees. Electronic learning (distance learning in its many forms) and international mobility of the students, two closely intertwined elements, therefore become essential corollaries to networked education.

One of the features of globalization relates to the pedagogical shift from the teaching procedure to the learning process. The students become protagonists of their educational programmes and therefore he/she acquires more responsibility as well as autonomy.

The student's role has become much more active in terms of the learning process that has replaced the old teaching method. More responsibility for students means that they are now able to choose their modalities, timing and places where learning those notions that will be part of their cultural and professional background. These can be acquired by successive approximations by means of lifelong education targeted to their own expectations. For this reason general education and, even more, higher education must be considered as a part of a continuous system starting from childhood and going on during all the different phases of life.

The UNESCO and the Council of Europe have proposed separate conventions for either the recognition of studies or their equivalence (this latter mechanism has become obsolete since it is difficult to manage); lately they have put forward a joint proposal in order to make it more feasible. The main setback to this type of approach is the difficulty to gather the support and the approval of the member states, which supposedly should adhere to and sign the agreement. The European Union has institutionalized the former Erasmus programme, now Socrates, which allows students to move within the European universities, following courses which subsequently are recognized by the sending institution. Something similar but, perhaps, more efficient has been organized by the Nordic network.

The problem of quality control becomes therefore of crucial importance both in terms of the methodology to be adopted as well as in terms of the educators who are assigned the task of implementing it. In fact, it is necessary first of all to create a new mindset ready to adjust to and accept proposals for new mechanisms to assure, possibly by means of outsourced quality controls, an accurate, objective, reliable and transparent analysis of quality. Sometimes the quality criterion is exploited to cover possible misunderstandings, poor knowledge of others' characteristics, mistrust or even arrogant convictions about the superiority of one's own education system.

International recognition of university degrees is a prerequisite to facilitate student, teacher and graduate mobility with a view to guaranteeing the prosperity of a region and thus permitting a better understanding of the socio-economic, cultural and traditional aspects of the "others".

This consideration concerns, therefore, not only the choice of how to acquire the knowledge but also where this acquisition can be performed. Some of you know that there are networks like the European one as well as that of the Nordic organization, which allow students to go around acquiring information and competencies like those "fratres" of the middle age used to do. This makes it mandatory that the studies (even small parts of them), as well as diplomas, titles and degrees obtained in a country should be marketable (a bad word but appropriate to describe a reality). Therefore, recognition is meant as the mechanism which should organize the curricula in order to accommodate, at same time, a sound base of common contents on which to build a smaller though significant portion to be filled with programmes related to the specificity of the territory. Therefore tradition and cultural heritage are preserved. This portion will take into account, also, the community needs in order to adjust and adapt the education process to meet as far as possible these needs. In this way, it is possible to create new opportunities and eventually new jobs. The process of building up specific programmes related only to the territory should be limited, however, in order to avoid jeopardizing the whole curriculum, which should be organized, instead, in a way to attain interregional or international validity.

The recognition of qualifications prompts a greater mobility of students and of graduates enlarging the availability of jobs and creating new opportunities. The process could become a source of income. From this point of view, the process of recognition must not be considered as a time goal but as a means for other and more important results. It is a "political" effort to restructure and redefine the character of the higher education process which should focus the curricula on local needs without underestimating and forgetting the necessity of a wider vision in order to be acceptable and useful in various social contexts. Other priorities are: to revisit the pedagogical methodologies, to redesign the financial strategies, and to give an appropriate importance to lifelong education. The effect is the experience of new cultures and different attitudes, which finally leads to a better understanding among peoples and promote cross-fertilization which finally could be beneficial for a culture of peace and non-violence.

At same time, it can induce universities to redefine and restructure their didactic programmes, to find and use new methodologies (like the distance learning), to change the strategies of financial support by including or increasing private contributions, and to promote the lifelong learning process.

Disadvantages are possible and some risks might be present such as the brain drain, language difficulties, resistance or refusal to take part in other cultural and social realities, overcrowding, difficulties in finding adequate financial support and sometimes also the indifference or slowness of states regarding the ratification of cultural agreements.

Recognition, however, does not mean uniformity or equivalence of curricula, but, on the contrary, allows different programmes of studies, provided that some common features are maintained. This is very important because it gives the possibility to include information, notions and, as a whole, competencies specific to the tradition of that particular territory or region, and maintaining the cultural heritage of each society. The cross-fertilization deriving from this process is, once again, highly beneficial for recruiting peoples to the culture of peace.

In some interventions during this conference, the term "brain waste" has been used meaning that acquired cultural and professional competencies sometimes are not utilized properly or not used at all. The recognition process, by making possible the mobility of people and by producing new job opportunities, could partly overcome this brain waste.

The suggestion put forward by both UNESCO and the Council of Europe has always been to submit the agreements for the recognition of degrees beforehand to the member states and then ask the universities of the countries to implement them on a practical basis. Unfortunately this mechanism has not given good results and has not lead to the adoption of degree recognition by many member states. It is for this reason that CMU, while realizing that the proposed procedure was correct, has suggested a different way of pursuing this since 1995. This different way is based on the now accepted (albeit not really practised) university autonomy. Our simple proposal consists of asking most of the schools and universities entitled to issue higher education diplomas for the acceptance of the principle of recognition before asking individual member states and governments (at least in the Mediterranean Basin) to adhere to the agreements. This is because schools and universities themselves may induce their own government to

subscribe to the agreements. In fact, CMU believes that the “bottom-up” mechanisms (from the periphery to the central governments) is more efficient than the top-down approach so far preferred by both UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Obviously it is necessary to propose viable teaching syllabuses and periods devoted to scientific research with a multinational faculty made up of highly qualified teachers contributing to the educational process at centres of excellence located where capacities and resources (not only financial but also social, cultural, environmental and infrastructural in nature) are already available. This modern educational process must be open to students coming from different regions who would be obliged to come back to their home countries to contribute, at least for a certain period, to the socio-economic development of the own region and country. Then, hopefully, the important endeavour of the “brain gain” would be realized.