

The Danube, through its rich history, has remained timeless and truly enchanting. German poet Friedrich Hölderlin called the Danube "a refreshing, melodious river, sometimes foaming with high spirits, at other times dreaming serenely." For many centuries this river has been a reflection of Europe's history and destiny- an economic lifeline, a great highway to conquest, and a source of inspiration for poets and musicians. Now it is our turn to be inspired.

RECTORI MAGNIFICI, ESTEEMED MEMBERS OF THE DANUBE RECTORS' CONFERENCE, MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT, YOUR EXCELLENCES, DISTINGUISHED COLLEAGUES, DEAR GUESTS, ON BEHALF OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NOVI SAD THE HOST OF THE 26<sup>th</sup> DANUBE RECTORS' CONFERENCE I WISH YOU VERY WARM WELCOME TO NOVI SAD.

Higher education has expanded massively in recent decades so that today its character and performance have great implications for all members of society, whether or not they engage directly with higher education. Its economic implications have been the most emphasized, but only slightly less so have been its implications for social equity and mobility and for social cohesion and integration. The implications of expanded higher education and research systems have local and regional dimensions together with national and global ones, as well as shaping the lives of individual citizens.

2010 is an important date on the European calendar. It not only marks the first decade of the twentieth century, but in education policy terms, the first decade of advancement on the European Lisbon goals, and a significant benchmark for the European policy Education and Training 2010 and the Bologna Process.

Tracing back the policy trail, the Barcelona European Council (March 2002) ambitiously called on European systems of education to become a 'world reference' by 2010. Since, a plethora of initiatives and advancements have cascaded down from the ministerial to the institutional level by means of the Bologna Process, a 40 country wave of higher education structural reform, supported in turn by the European Community with cross-national policy and programmes. In the Communication 'The role of Universities in a Europe of knowledge', the more ambitious Bologna goals reverberate: adequate and sustainable university income, autonomous university management, resources and research excellence, bridging universities and enterprise, globally competitive higher education- all these issues place higher education at the heart of the Lisbon strategy, to become the strongest global economy by 2010. Subsequently, a May 2006 Communication 'Delivering the modernization agenda for education, research, and innovation' stresses that a 'major effort needs to be made to achieve the core Bologna reforms by 2010' and that universities need to grasp the Lifelong Learning agenda with an entrepreneurial mindset.

Yet none of these goals are finite, and many of the goals cited above will not be wholly accomplished across Europe by 2010, despite the ambitions. While the institutional, national, regional and European levels are working fastidiously on

the individual components related to the Bologna Process, whether it be degree structures, mobility, vocational learning, adult learning, graduate attainment, social access, internationalization of the campus, quality assurance, or the like, as well as on the achievement of the education related benchmarks of the Lisbon agenda, it is important not only to step back and reflect on the cross-cutting nature of these ambitions, but on their longevity. What is the future of Education and Training 2010 beyond 2010?

Three major issues are identified as facing higher education in the years to come:

- the challenges of demography,
- global competitiveness and
- redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of the various actors in a system defining higher education as a public good.

**The first major issue facing Europe in the decade to come is the demographic challenge of an ageing and increasingly diverse population in a knowledge society.** This challenge is to be met by reinforcing the social dimension of higher education, by fully engaging in lifelong learning practices and by rethinking international mobility.

Demography in Europe will have a significant impact on higher education. Population projections in EU-27 countries together with accession countries speak a clear language: data on fertility rates, migration and mobility combine and coincide in a shrinking youth population over the next 50 years. In many countries the rate of elderly population is increasing faster than fertility rates. Populations in the EU-27 countries failed to reproduce themselves over a prolonged period with a fertility rate of less than 1,5. European universities, who traditionally educate students aged 18-25, will obviously be affected from the reduced numbers of their traditional target group in the long term. It is projected that some higher education systems in Europe are under the high risk of closure or setback while others are under medium risk due to population falling. Responsiveness of higher education systems to these demographic changes and possible compensation strategies through migration and mobility should be considered.

### **Migration as a Counter-Development?**

Only due to higher immigration rates the annual population growth in the EU has been maintained so far. However from 2025 on, immigration will not be enough to sustain the natural population growth and a decrease will be observed. In some countries net migration projected reinforces population growth and in others, it reverses the trend of population decline (Austria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovakia and Slovenia). Countries receiving immigration will replace the higher education population which is naturally shrinking. However, those countries that have no natural population growth due to low fertility and are at the same time major senders of immigrants to other countries, are

under severe risk of contraction of higher education institutions, stagnation in education market as well as in labour market, and finally small economic growth. Today it looks unlikely (and undesired?), that increased immigration can compensate the potential loss of enrolment in higher education. Subordinately, other concerns spring to mind: Can the migrants really replace the native students in universities? Are schools ready to enrol their majority of learners as foreigners? Are university curricula responsive to migrant needs? Are universities ready to open their doors to foreign staff?

### **Scenarios of higher education in 2050**

Using the population projection data on age groups and migration a typology of projected higher education in 2050 has been developed. According to this classification, by 2050 many countries, except Denmark, Luxemburg, Sweden and the UK, will hardly be enrolling natural population in higher education. Due to labour migration, countries like Germany, Denmark, Spain, France, the UK and Ireland will continue to host second generations of migrants enrolled in tertiary education. Countries whose higher education is under risk are mainly the eastern and some central European countries where the risk is due to low fertility rates and negative migration ratios: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia and Serbia.

**A second major issue facing Europe is the competitiveness of European higher education in a global context.** The policy will engage European higher education globally by striking a balance between cooperation and competition. The role of educated people, who clearly see how economies and values operate together and how they are accelerated by critical thinking and discovery, is central to the achievements of humankind. The teaching and learning experience will have to reflect this dimension of education.

The nexus between teaching and research will remain a principle firmly entrenched in the EHEA. It is recognized that there are various types of research and that there is great differentiation in the missions of higher education institutions.

And as it was stated in the

**Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve in chapter:**

### ***Education, research and innovation***

*“Higher education should be based at all levels on state of the art research and development thus fostering innovation and creativity in society. Consequently, the number of people with research competences should increase. Doctoral programmes should provide high quality*

*disciplinary research and increasingly be complemented by interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral programmes. Moreover, public authorities and institutions of higher education will make the career development of early stage researchers more attractive.”*

**A third issue facing higher education in the years to come is the redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of the various actors in a system defining higher education as a public good.** A policy statement by ministers from the **Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education** has determined the various roles in relation to quality development and assurance, funding frameworks, governance, institutional autonomy and accountability and the diversity of missions and institutions.

The present organizational structure of the Bologna Process is endorsed as being fit for purpose, while it is recognized that a link with other policy areas will have to be established. This concerns, for example, immigration and social security to advance the mobility and social dimension agenda.

**AND WHAT IS THE DANUBE RECTORS' CONFERENCE ROLE IN IT? SHOULD WE STAY A SIDE AS A NETWORK OR BECOME A STRONG INFLUENTIAL ORGANIZATION TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REGION?!**

And as it was suggested by our colleagues from University of Maribor during the preparation of this conference:

*“We need to recall our idea from our last meeting in Cluj-Napoca and say that it's (latest) time that the DRC becomes a more professional organization registered in Brussels and having a permanent representative there. This kind of a permanent secretariat in Brussels would enable us to be an active co-creator of the EU strategy for the Danube region. This would be, of course, also a way how to apply more efficiently for common EU project, being strong and effective... Moreover, this will be for sure a good reason for attracting new members to the DRC.”*

The Danube is a symbol for the future of international understanding and support in Europe. A new organizational structure is creating a development area of local and regional partnership from the Black Forest to the Black Sea. The ever-closer cooperation and partnership of our cities and regions along the Danube is producing joint projects in culture, science, education, ecology and business.

*“The Danube as sine qua non Europas.”* The Hungarian writer Péter Esterházy's statement is not only a historical truth, but also reflects the current political development The European Danube region creates a new European

axis from the Black Forest to the Black Sea, uniting many diverse peoples and cultures.

So, the next step is to give the growing local and regional cooperation along the Danube a solid organizational structure and define regional strategy. The strategy development process for the European Danube Region requires from DRC as well to think about priorities, policies and actions related to the future role of the higher education in the region.

So some strategic direct priorities are:

“*Socio-Economic and cultural integration*” through:

- Transnational research and scientific cooperation -> cooperation of research centres and programmes, university and high-level school cooperation (e.g. Danube Rectors’ Conference), vocational training, exploration of joint interests within the EU-context...
- Addressing “Knowledge triangle” potentials (interaction between education, research and innovation) and/or the “triple helix”-type of actions (interactions between academia and the private and public sectors)

But beside the direct priorities, the role of higher education is very important in other priorities as well, like:

“*Connectivity*” for example and:

- Importance of the river Danube as transnational “backbone” of the regions transport and logistic system (Corridor VII) - addressing also economic, social and ecological aspects --> waterway infrastructure needs, awareness raising concerning potentials, ICT tools for navigation, transferring ports into multimodal logistic centres, human capital development, fostering integrated planning/development instruments, ...

The next priority is “*Environment and Risk Prevention*” through:

- Integrated River Planning, Danube River Basin Management Plan (EU Water Framework Directive, International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), Flood Directive, ...) -> Prevention against floods and droughts, development of ecological quality of Danube river system/catchment area as a whole, water management issues, quality of landscape, natural and cultural heritage, protective and renaturation measures, sustainable land-use measures, investments, monitoring, networking, education and training, ...
- Protection and development of the environment, nature and biodiversity conservation (e.g. Habitats Directive and Birds Directive (NATURA 2000)) --> standards and policy instruments, legal frameworks, environmental controls, private-public-partnership models, protection of ecologically valuable areas (incl. nature parks, ecological networks...), eco-tourism, natural resources (water)...
- Environmental infrastructure and technologies, like sewage plants, waste management, sanitation, soil purification, water purification, potable

- water supply, energy-efficient housing ... --> investment needs, modernization, capacity building and training measures, ...
- And of course: Enhancing the role of education for promoting sustainable development

For us Europeans, the Danube – our Common River – has always been one of the most celebrated symbols of Europe, linking as it does so many countries, regions and cities together on its journey to the sea. By preparing a Danube Strategy together, we can make use of that symbolism and help to deliver genuine benefits and improvements in the quality of life of all those European citizens living along this great river.

And where else can a European identity develop, if not along the Danube?

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