

**'The social dimension of the European higher education area
and world-wide competition'**

- Recommendations from the Paris seminar -

Ministers in charge of higher education meeting in Berlin on September 18th and 19th 2003 stressed the importance of social dimension in the building up of the European higher education area (EHEA) :

'Ministers reaffirm the importance of the social dimension in the Bologna Process. The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social inequalities both at national and at European level. Ministers reaffirm their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility.'

'Ministers take into due consideration the conclusions of the European Councils in Lisbon (2000) and Barcelona (2002) aimed at making Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' and calling for further action and closer cooperation in the context of the Bologna Process.'

'Ministers agree that the attractiveness and openness of the European higher education should be reinforced. They confirm their readiness to further develop scholarship programmes for students from third countries.'

'Ministers declare that transnational exchanges in higher education should be governed on the basis of academic quality and academic values, and agree to work in all appropriate fora to that end.'

'Ministers stress the need for appropriate studying and living conditions for the students, so that they can successfully complete their studies within an appropriate period of time without obstacles related to their social and economic background. They also stress the need for more comparable data on the social and economic situation of students.'

Meant by Ministers to be a counterbalance to the need to increase Europe's competitiveness, the social dimension proves to be, at the end of the seminar, a constituent element of the EHEA and a necessary condition of its attractiveness in world-wide competition.

So our seminar considered the social dimension of the EHEA as the whole set of mechanisms aiming to ensure equality of opportunities and social cohesion in order to lead the great majority of young people to the best possible level and to the best fulfilment of their potential. The social dimension of the EHEA therefore integrates the processes of access to higher education but also counselling policies in view of the students' success, financial and material support and information and guidance policies as well.

Making real the knowledge society, aimed at by the Lisbon strategy, requires an increase, in each country, of a same age group having access to higher education. It will be possible only with a meaningful and appropriate counselling of students. In that sense, economic competition and social dimension go hand in hand.

The requirement for quality of higher education institutions in Europe is one of the cornerstones of an efficient EHEA, attractive to the rest of the world, that Ministers committed themselves to build by 2010. This attractiveness must be based on the highest academic level as well as on the quality of services students are provided with, in particular in terms of information, guidance and advice, housing and integration into the labour market.

Taking into account the social dimension implies to care for reducing failure rates to the maximum and by doing so for ensuring the best possible training level for the great majority of people.

A genuine mobility culture must be developed. In this perspective, the policy for the international opening up of institutions must care for integrating mobility in a successful learning path of every student and sees to develop a mobility of quality, notably with the development of appropriate linguistic preparations, counselling geared to student academic and social needs, financial support in order to allow mobility including post-graduates. Within Europe and towards third countries, the development of mobility which is a key principle of the EHEA must be done on the basis of balanced exchanges aiming to strengthen higher education and economic growth in the countries mobile students and researchers come from.

ON THE BASIS OF THESE CONSIDERATIONS,

PARTICIPANTS TO THE SEMINAR ADMIT THAT:

- strengthening the social dimension of higher education is one of the conditions for making real a knowledge society, a core objective of the Lisbon strategy, which implies increasing the number of graduates from higher education through lifelong learning ;
- social and economic background should not be a barrier to access to higher education, successful completion of studies and meaningful employment after graduation ;
- taking into account the social dimension in the EHEA both at the national level and the European level contributes to the creation of a coherent, balanced and competitive European higher education area.

CONSEQUENTLY,

PARTICIPANTS TO THE SEMINAR RECOMMEND THAT:

- the process of building the European higher education area improve its social dimension and set it as a priority ;
- in that perspective, a specific analytical survey, built on existing initiatives and under the authority of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), focused on the social and economic situation of students, including obstacles to access and mobility and taking into account the lifelong learning objectives, should be carried out by 2007 in all Bologna member States ;
- decisions for financing in the European higher education area take into account social cohesion objectives regarding access to higher education, living and studying conditions, financial and material support, services for students such as information, guidance and advice, and also mobility support at the European level and the national level alike ;
- quality assurance mechanisms which are developing both internally and externally integrate as a must the social dimension in all aspects dealing with living and studying conditions and relate it to the multiple purposes of higher education and long-term results ;
- beyond Bergen, in order to make the social dimension of the EHEA a reality, it is vital to secure the full involvement and the working together of national authorities, higher education institutions and students, which is the only guarantee for effectiveness.