

## **INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND HIGHER EDUCATION: A COUNCIL OF EUROPE VIEW**

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I would like to join Professor Vladimir Filippov, our host, and Professor Radu Damian, the Chair of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research, in welcoming you to this conference. I would also like to transmit the greetings and best wishes of the Right Honourable Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, who had planned to be with us today but who regrettably had to change his plans for reasons beyond his control.

The strong interest of the Secretary General underlines the importance of this conference, which focuses on the role of higher education in promoting intercultural dialogue in broader society. It complements a conference held in Strasbourg some 14 months ago on intercultural dialogue on the university campus, at which Professor Filippov, was one of the speakers. It also underlines the strong relevance of higher education to the overarching political goals of the Council of Europe: democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In our modern and diverse European societies, these values cannot be a reality unless we, as societies and individuals, are proficient in intercultural dialogue. Higher education is of key importance to this endeavour.

It is difficult to imagine a more appropriate venue for this conference than the Russian University of Peoples' Friendship. Not only does its name describe what is an important goal of intercultural dialogue. It is a university at which dialogue is a fact of everyday life. That sounds simple, and part of the university's achievement is to make dialogue *appear* simple, but, as Professor Filippov told us in Strasbourg a little over a year ago, this achievement relies on a very conscious institutional policy.

The importance of what our host institution does is not limited to intercultural dialogue on campus, however. This university would of course have been an excellent venue for our previous conference, focusing on the university campus. The reason it is also an excellent venue for *this* conference, focusing on the role of the university in broader society, is at least two fold. On the one hand, our host institution is very much aware of its role as an actor in society, based on the values of its highly international and intercultural profile. On the other hand, this university prepares its graduates to be active citizens in their home countries and to carry with them the experience of dialogue on campus and apply the same principles as citizens of broader society.

I am pleased to see here today representatives of both ministries and universities as well as of NGOs. This is precisely the mix of actors that makes the Council of Europe's higher

education programme unique. I am particularly pleased to see Rectors from Kazakhstan as well as Lebanon among the participants. Kazakhstan is, as you know, not a party to the European Cultural Convention, but it is a country with which the Council of Europe is developing active cooperation and it is an important country in terms of intercultural dialogue as well as of the more classical areas of higher education reform. Lebanon will host an important conference on intercultural dialogue in November, organized by the International Association of Universities, which also provides the Rapporteur for this conference.

Allow me also to acknowledge the participation of Ana Perona-Fjeldstad, the Director of the Europe Wergeland Centre in Oslo. This centre, which was officially opened last Friday, will be dedicated to enhancing the role of education professionals in developing democratic culture and intercultural dialogue, and it is an active partner of the Council of Europe.

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Any Council of Europe view of intercultural dialogue will take as its starting point the White Paper that was adopted by the Committee of Ministers in May 2008. Many of you will be broadly familiar with our White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, and I will not present it in any great detail here today. I will, however, underline certain aspects of the White Paper that I consider important for our conference.

The first of these is the title: Living Together as Equals in Dignity. The title is short but it contains two key elements without which intercultural dialogue is impossible.

Firstly, living together. This is far more than co-existence or living side by side. It is also more than mere inter-nationalization or simply speaking to each other from opposite sides of a mental or physical border. Living together presupposes close contacts and interaction between individuals of different cultures, and it is an important challenge to our European societies.

I wonder if it is not also quite a challenge to universities, even if universities are often thought of as international institutions *per se*. The issue is not just whether we have foreign students and staff on campus. The issue is really whether foreign students and staff are integrated into university life. Are they a part of the academic community or are they left to themselves and their own community? If they are, what does this mean for the role of the university in promoting dialogue in broader society, and what does it mean for how these foreign students and staff will themselves act as citizens?

Secondly, equals in dignity. It is important to underline that we do not only speak of the equality of *rights* – even if the Council of Europe is a human rights organizations – but equality of *dignity*. That is, basically, saying that we are all of equal value as human beings. This has profound implications for our societies, and there is no shortage of historical examples of what happens when societies deny the fundamental value of

human beings. It is also worth remembering that some political parties, in many European countries, have based their electoral programme on the assumption that humans are not quite equal if they are “too different”. Recognizing the humanity of “the other” in practice is far more difficult than doing so intellectually. The fact that these parties receive votes is in itself an important argument for intercultural dialogue. Our equal dignity can be denied, but it cannot be abolished, and higher education should play an important role in creating awareness of it. Higher education, an eminently intercultural domain and one committed to intellectual curiosity, cannot remain at a distance from this endeavour.

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The White Paper focuses on five broad policy areas:

- 1) Democratic governance of cultural diversity
- 2) Democratic citizenship and participation
- 3) Learning and teaching intercultural competences
- 4) Spaces for intercultural dialogue
- 5) Intercultural dialogue in international relations

This is not the place to explain these concepts in detail, but I would like to make the general point that the cornerstones of a political culture valuing diversity are the common values of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, pluralism, tolerance, non-discrimination and mutual respect. *Democratic governance* does not simply mean that the views of a majority must always prevail: a balance must be achieved which ensures the fair and proper treatment of persons belonging to minorities and avoids any abuse of a dominant position. On the other hand, *citizenship* is, in the widest sense, a right and indeed a responsibility to participate in the cultural, social and economic life and in public affairs of the community together with others. This is key to intercultural dialogue, because it invites us to think of others not in a stereotypical way – as “the other” – but as fellow citizens and equals.

Let us, then, look at the policy areas outlined in the White Paper from the vantage point of higher education.

At first glance, what is immediately of concern to higher education would seem to be learning and teaching intercultural competences. If one way of looking at education is as a process leading to a set of competences, it is indeed difficult to see how or why these competences would not include those needed for intercultural dialogue.

We often hear that today’s world is “flat” - not in the same sense as this statement would have been made 500 years ago, but in the sense that modern technology and modern means of communication have made the different places on Earth so intimately connected that they all depend on each other. This is not the place to discuss whether Earth is really flat or whether the particularities of our cultural heritage represent mountains and valleys.

The point is that relating to the world beyond one's immediate horizon is not an option – it is a given and a must. Trying to hide from the broader world makes about as much sense as sticking one's head in the sand. Whether we aim to work internationally or whether we rather aim to work in our home country or even our home region or community, we will need to understand those who have different cultural backgrounds and who either live and work in our countries or communities or who visit for purposes of work or leisure.

To put it bluntly: whatever our line of work or our place of residence, it is highly unlikely that we will spend our entire lives avoiding foreigners. All parts of the education system, including higher education, must help provide learners with the competences they need not only to deal with this complex reality of diverse cultural background, but to thrive in and benefit from this environment. We will be much richer for the effort.

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What, then, are these competences? Competences or qualifications are often referred to as what a person knows, understands and is able to do. I would add that our view of competences should also include attitudes. Do we see opportunities – challenges that can be met – or only insurmountable problems? Do we see cultural diversity as a challenge that can enrich us or a problem from which we must either hide or run?

Beyond the competences that higher education will give learners in the respective fields of study – whether engineering, history or law – higher education must give all graduates a set of generic competences, such as analytical ability, communication skills or the ability to make decisions, often on the basis of incomplete information.

Without aiming to give a complete list of intercultural competences, I would at least venture to say that higher education should provide all its graduates with a world view that does not stop at national borders or even at the borders of Europe, nor should it be limited to the northern hemisphere.

Higher education should provide its graduates with competence in a *foreign language* – or even better, in more than one foreign language. This is not only because we need foreign language skills in order to communicate with people from other cultures – and that is important enough in itself – but also because learning a foreign language means understanding and accepting that a concept can be expressed in different ways.

Universities are important in *increasing our understanding and knowledge of less widely spoken languages as well as of the cultures they carry*, of the history and societies that are less well known to us and also to improve our understanding of how majorities and minorities relate to each other. Are there situations that tend to make majorities more aggressive and less understanding towards minorities, and if yes, how can these situations be counteracted? We know that economic distress tends to make people less understanding of those who have a different background, and that makes the need for

intercultural dialogue and awareness even more important in times of economic crisis, like the one we are going through now.

Higher education must also build on secondary education to improve its graduates' *understanding of history*, not only to improve their understanding of where their own countries and cultures come from but also to understand how other countries and cultures have evolved through history. An understanding of history may also help graduates get a better perspective on time. Above all, it may help learners understand the need to *understand the views of others*. The Council of Europe has been a pioneer in developing methods for history teaching, in particular through the concept of *multiperspectivity*. This concept has much in common with intercultural dialogue. It emphasizes the need to look at historical events from different points of view and to understand how and why others may have very different views on one's own history. Multiperspectivity does *not* mean that all views are equally acceptable. It does not free historians from the need to look at the evidence, and it does not offer shelter to those who deny basic human dignity or who deny crimes against humanity. Like intercultural dialogue itself, multiperspectivity is *open-minded* but not *mind-less*.

The Council of Europe is also a leading organization in *citizenship education*. While democratic citizenship and intercultural dialogue are not the same thing, many of the competences we need for one we also need for the other. The ability to think both critically and constructively is essential for a culture of citizenship: critically because not all solutions put forward by public authorities are of benefit to citizens and constructively because for citizens to take ownership of their societies, they must not only be able to block unacceptable proposals but even more importantly to participate in developing viable alternatives. Criticizing is often the easy part, while coming up with viable alternatives may be far more difficult.

It is difficult to imagine how a society can be fully democratic if it cannot conduct intercultural dialogue, and it is equally difficult to imagine how intercultural dialogue can be conducted in societies that stray far from the ideals and practices of democracy. The competences needed for intercultural dialogue are therefore also largely those needed to develop and maintain a culture of democracy, and this culture cannot exist without education.

A particularly difficult point for many Europeans to *understand is the role of religion*. In many societies as well as in many cultural groups religion plays a fundamental role, as a belief system and as a cultural reference, and this is often difficult to fathom for those whose background is in more secularized societies. It may be worth remembering that Europe is in many ways atypical in the relatively low visibility of religion in our societies, even if here also, there are differences between individuals and cultures. The point is not whether one is a believer or not but whether one can understand the role that religion plays in many people's lives, value systems, cultural background and personal attitudes. Higher education should play an important role in developing this kind of understanding. This is why education is the main topic of the Council of Europe

encounters on interreligious dialogue, the second of which will be held in Strasbourg at the end of this month.

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So much for the obvious role of higher education in developing the competences needed to make intercultural dialogue possible. As we often hear, competences are what we need to get a job. This is right, and the importance of getting a job should not be underestimated. We hardly need to be reminded of that in a world that is in the middle of an economic crisis, and we can only hope that we are at least in the middle of the crisis and not just in the beginning of it.

What we need to be reminded of is rather that we need competences not only to get a job, but also for our other roles as citizens and human beings. I cannot resist the temptation here to refer to the Council of Europe's important work on defining the public responsibility for higher education and research, which led to a political recommendation by our Committee of Ministers. In this recommendation, we also spelled out the main purposes of higher education. As you would expect, preparing for employment is one of those purposes, but it is one of four. The full list bears repeating:

1. preparation of sustainable employment;
2. preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
3. personal development;
4. the development and maintenance of a broad and advanced knowledge base.

The purpose of referring to this list at our conference is that it reminds us that higher education has an important role to play also in the other areas identified by the Council of Europe White Paper. How can we think of democratic governance and cultural diversity or of democratic citizenship and participation without thinking of competences? How can we think of spaces for intercultural dialogue without thinking of universities, both in their roles as communities in themselves – dialogue on campus – and as essential actors in broader society?

Democratic governance, citizenship and participation is partly a question of technical competence and partly of attitudes. Modern, complex societies cannot be governed, and politicians and voters cannot make sound decisions, unless decision makers as well as voters have a good understanding of a whole range of issues.

In modern societies, governance, citizenship and participation cannot disregard the need to include those with a different cultural background than the majority population. As we have seen, this is not uncontroversial in European political life, where citizenship is often taken to mean the name and the colour of the passport one carries and where democracy is thought of only in terms of voting. Voting is of course important, but democratic citizenship and participation refer to the participation and influence of members of a

community on the lives and policies of their societies. Not least, it refers to the commitment of citizens to their own societies. No society can survive if its members are apathetic or if citizens treat their society only as a providers of services. That, incidentally, is one reason why it is so important to think of students as members of the academic community and not as clients.

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I started by expressing particular pleasure at the participation of Rectors from Kazakhstan and Lebanon. These two countries represent regions – Central Asia and the broader Mediterranean region with a strong Arab contribution – that are very important to Europe. We need to understand these regions, we need to appreciate their cultural background, and we need to develop better cooperation with them. Higher education should be at the forefront of this cooperation. Not only is higher education essential to developing a deeper understanding of the need for mechanisms of intercultural dialogue. Higher education policies themselves offer an excellent topic for cooperation that will also need to be carried out with an awareness of cultural differences.

As you know, the Council of Europe is strongly engaged in the Bologna Process, and our host, Professor Filippov, is not only an eminent Rector and friend of the Council. He was also the Minister of Education who brought Russia into the Bologna Process. I firmly believe that the Bologna Process is an excellent basis for cooperation between Europe and other parts of the world, but I am also convinced that this cooperation can only be fruitful if it is approached from the point of view of intercultural dialogue. “Bologna policies” copied blindly are likely to fail, but “Bologna policies” adapted with due regard to the background of each region and country should have every possibility to succeed, and the Council of Europe is both a willing and – if I may be allowed to say so – competent partner in this endeavour.

I would also like to point to the Council of Europe’s North-South Centre, which is located in Lisbon and which has a particular mandate to work with non-European countries, not least those of the Mediterranean and the broader Arab world. Its brief, however, spans wider, and there is no reason why a country like Kazakhstan could not join the Centre. I also very much hope that Russia will participate in the Centre, which technically will be done by acceding to the partial agreement under which the Centre was established.

This is one of the issues I will raise during my stay in Moscow. I would also very much welcome a high profile activity in Russia, and why not linked to education? It could focus on teaching about religion in school – and please note that I said “teaching *about* religion” and not just “teaching religion” – or a conference on an issue of higher education reform with the participation of Central Asia or the Arab world. It could address a specific issue of higher education reform and thus provide an opportunity to *practice* and not only to *talk about* intercultural dialogue.

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Part of the reason why the Council of Europe is a valuable partner in higher education policy is that we see higher education as an important part of modern society. As we have often said, also in “Bologna debates”: structural reform is important but only if it serves a purpose. They must be “structures with a mission”. That purpose must be to develop the kind of societies in which we can live together as equals in dignity and which are fluent in intercultural dialogue.

Some 10 years ago, the Council of Europe ran a pilot project on the university as a site of citizenship. Among other things, the project found that many academic staff – and probably also students – do not consider developing a culture of democracy as a task for higher education. Why do democracy when you can do chemistry? However, the two are intimately linked. Chemists are also citizens, and the citizenship mission of education does not stop at primary or secondary school. I suspect we find many of the same attitudes to the role of higher education in promoting intercultural dialogue, and this is borne out by looking at the kind of issues on which the majority of university leaders engage. However, universities cannot engage in developing our future society unless they engage in developing intercultural dialogue. Universities cannot be universities unless their mission and the education they provide is greater than the sum of its individual academic disciplines.

Let me end by quoting a key paragraph in the White Paper, because this paragraph illustrates my point very clearly. When it speaks about higher education, the White Paper says:

*Higher-education institutions play an important role in fostering intercultural dialogue, through their education programmes, as actors in broader society and as sites where intercultural dialogue is put into practice. As the Steering Committee on Higher Education and Research suggests, the university is ideally defined precisely by its universality – its commitment to open-mindedness and openness to the world, founded on enlightenment values. The university thus has great potential to engender “intercultural intellectuals” who can play an active role in the public sphere.*