

**Council of Europe Seminar
Intercultural Dialogue on the University Campus
Strasbourg
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Seminar Report

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Introduction and context

The seminar *Intercultural Dialogue on the University Campus* was organized by the Department of Higher Education and History Teaching of the Council of Europe. It took place on the premises of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, in the Palais de l'Europe, on 4 and 5 March 2008. The seminar was attended by about 50 delegates, as well as the speakers and Council of Europe staff. Delegates came from government departments (ministries of education) of signatory countries of the European Cultural Convention, higher education institutions, as well as European and international inter- and non-governmental organizations.

The seminar stood in the context of an increased commitment of the Council of Europe in matters relating to intercultural dialogue. Having already engaged in earlier projects on this theme, which falls into the organisation's wider commitment to the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the Council of Europe is preparing to adopt and publish a *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*. Other European organizations have likewise made the intercultural dialogue a key policy objective, such as the European Union, which made 2008 the *European Year of the Intercultural Dialogue*. Recent tensions in Europe and around the world bear witness to the urgent need for a dialogue of cultures and people.

There are at least two roles which higher education institutions can and should play in promoting intercultural understanding. The first one is direct and concerns the furthering of this dialogue on its own premises, i.e. inside the institution. The second one is indirect and concerns higher education's role in promoting the intercultural dialogue in wider society, i.e. outside the bounds of the institution. In line with its title, the seminar focused on the first of these two related issues – the intercultural dialogue on campus – but it also touched on aspects of outreach to society.

The seminar was made up of plenary presentations and discussions, as well as two parallel working groups. The approach to the theme was comprehensive, ranging from fundamental and overarching aspects, such as the link between the intercultural dialogue

and democracy, to concrete case examples of the realisation of the intercultural dialogue in individual universities in Europe. Overall, there were eight different plenary presentations, next to the introduction by the organisers, the report of the *rapporteur général*, and the two parallel working groups. The seminar was chaired by Council of Europe representatives (Radu Damian and Virgílio Meira Soares, Chair and Vice Chair of the CDESR, and Sjur Bergan). Friedrich Bechina (Holy See) and Elizabeth Colluci (EUA) acted as working group *rapporteurs*, and Alexander von Balluseck (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science) and Bruno Carapinha (ESU) were working group chairs.

The present report tries to capture the essence of the presentations and discussion of the seminar, rather than attempting to recapitulate or otherwise deal in detail with the individual presentations of the seminar. These latter are anyway contained in the volume this report is published in. The report is structured into a section consisting of the *rapporteur's* conclusions – observations on major issues at stake in the seminar - and another one containing the recommendations of the seminar.

Conclusions

The *first conclusion* to be drawn is perhaps an obvious one, but it needs to be stressed nonetheless: intercultural dialogue is *an issue of high relevance for Europe's higher education institutions*. Indeed, there was a palpable agreement at this seminar that it must become part of the mission of Europe's higher education institutions. And it must become a characteristic of their everyday life. There are various reasons for this.

- First of all, delegates documented with their active engagement, and with their meaningful and serious discussions during the two days of the seminar that they attach importance to the issue. Different delegates had different approaches to the theme, and therefore put the emphasis on different aspects of it, but this should not distract from the underlying consensus.
- Second, interculturality-motivated tensions are rising, in Europe as in the world at large. This is in no one's interest. The objective must be to ease tensions, to deescalate conflicts. And since intercultural problems often lie at the root of these conflicts, intercultural dialogue is the appropriate instrument.
- Third, and for the above reasons, the Council of Europe, an organization the delegates trust, has for some time already put an emphasis on this issue. Its Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research passed already in 2006 a *Statement on the Contribution of Higher Education to Intercultural Dialogue*, and it will, in the course of 2008, adopt a *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, from which no doubt further action is to follow. The European Union has also

underscored the importance of the intercultural dialogue, by making 2008 the *European Year of Intercultural Dialogue*.

- Fourth, and very substantially, there was a clear consensus amongst delegates that higher education has a broader mission than only those of imparting disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary skills and competences and of contributing to economic growth. As important as these missions are, the ‘European model of higher education’ has always pursued a wider set of aims, such as to foster democracy, the respect of human rights, the rule of law, and international understanding. The intercultural dialogue is part of this European model.

The *second conclusion* follows right from the first. It says that despite the uncontested need for an active intercultural dialogue on the campuses of Europe’s universities and colleges, *much work needs to be done still to make it a reality*. Intercultural dialogue is today far from common on our campuses. There is an undisputed need, but this need is not yet addressed by sufficient action. The fact that the seminar drew only a modest audience demonstrates that many have not yet fully understood the significance of intercultural dialogue in European higher education. The presentations and discussions showed that not too many higher education institutions are already strongly engaged in it. The examples of good practice presented at this seminar gained all the admiration they deserve: but they are the exception, not the rule.

Therefore, and this is the *third conclusion*, it is necessary to *make a very convincing case for the cause of intercultural dialogue on our campuses*. Otherwise it will always remain a legitimate demand, but it will never become a distinguishing trait of our universities. To make a very convincing case is also necessary because Europe’s universities and colleges see the list of their tasks (or at least of the expectations they are confronted with) extended almost by the month. Recent arrivals on the *cahier de charges* are lifelong learning, entrepreneurship, the creation of a literacy in matters of information and communication technologies, to name but a few. There is the serious danger of overburdening the European university. In the competition between all the new arrivals, it is necessary to state very sound reasons for an engagement in intercultural dialogue. But, luckily, there are very good reasons.

The *fourth conclusion*, perhaps rather an observation, consists of the agreement among delegates that *intercultural dialogue is multi-dimensional*, that the different dimensions and aspects are of importance to different stakeholders, but that they are all legitimate. This conference approached its theme from many angles. Perhaps therefore, it was marked less by heated controversy, but rather by a genuine and serious collective attempt to find a common basis of understanding, a joint point of reference. This endeavour has been successful by the realization and acknowledgment that there is a large diversity of manifestations of intercultural dialogue – all of which are legitimate.

The *fifth conclusion* is that *intercultural dialogue is faced with different challenges in different higher education institutions in different parts and countries of our continent*. This only proves once again the well-known truth that Europe – and European higher education - is highly diverse. The challenges to be tackled by the intercultural dialogue are not the same in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", in Spain and the Mediterranean region, in Russia, in Paris or in Frankfurt an der Oder on the German-Polish border. And, as delegates learned impressively from the keynote speaker, Fatou Sarr, they present themselves very differently when viewed with African eyes.

Looking back at the presentations and discussions, at least four challenges can be identified.

- Ethnically, religiously and culturally heterogeneous student populations from one and the same country (like, for example, in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia");
- Minority student populations from inside the country (third or fourth generation immigrants, who finally gained access to higher education);
- Mobile foreign students, who had entered the country for purposes of study (on short term stays, for example in the framework of exchange programmes, but also for entire degree studies).
- Multi-national – and possibly multi-ethnic and multi-religious - student bodies in which foreigners outnumber domestic students (Russian Peoples' Friendship University, London School of Economics, etc).

No reductionist one-size-fits-all approach can be applied to such diversity. Even though, as will be seen later, some common principles can probably be applied.

The *sixth conclusion* is that *the relationship between internationalisation and the intercultural dialogue requires further exploration*.

For sure, there are close links between the two phenomena, as delegates easily agreed on. But what exactly the relationship is remained somewhat contested. On the one hand, there were those – among presenters as participants – who seemed to equate the two. They thought that international mobility, the mastery of languages, and joint programmes, to name but some internationalisation activities, would alone 'do the intercultural trick'. On the other hand, there were those who considered internationalisation as a necessary precondition of the intercultural dialogue, but not as a sufficient one. They maintained that to be international was not yet to be intercultural.

The *rapporteur* tends to agree with this latter point of view. Internationalisation creates the *opportunity* of intercultural encounters. But if they actually come about, is another matter – as the so-often quoted cases of isolated foreign students demonstrate. And even if the encounters do come about, they can fail. What is implied by intercultural dialogue

is a genuine encounter which succeeds. For this, more is necessary than that two people of different backgrounds find themselves in the same place at the same time.

A seventh conclusion is this: *higher education institutions are important actors in the intercultural dialogue, but they are part of a longer chain of actors.* Higher education's success in this area will be easier to achieve if intercultural matters play a strong role in earlier stages of education – in primary and secondary education, perhaps even pre-school education. This is all the more so because delegates stressed that the success of the intercultural dialogue hinges on general attitudes such as openness and a spirit of relating to others as equals, which are easiest fostered at an early age. Likewise, the need for the intercultural dialogue does not end with higher education. This is a process which will continue and which is *jamais aquis*. It is a life-long task.

An eighth conclusion, or rather a set of them, concerns the *concrete measures to be put in place to make the intercultural dialogue a reality in European higher education.* In this respect, there was obviously a very wide variety of proposals, ranging from the philosophical to the highly practical. It is not easy to do justice to such a diversity of approaches in a few sentences. But there were some points of strong consensus. Among them were:

- The intercultural dialogue should form an integral part of the mission statement of each higher education institution on our continent.
- The minimum level of practical engagement would be that no student graduates from a higher education institution in Europe without a basic understanding of and sensitivity to the needs of intercultural communication. Following Edo Pogliano, delegates referred to this minimum competence as “intercultural literacy”.
- The need was acknowledged to define a set of generic learning outcomes and competences to help define or to describe this intercultural literacy. Likewise, it was deemed helpful to produce a publication with examples of good practice, to help and inspire higher education institutions in the implementation of intercultural dialogue measures.
- Further, there was an agreement that the production of didactic material would be helpful for the same purpose (in the full knowledge that such material must not be prescriptive, but be an offer to help).

Delegates were also agreed that, in order to credibly formulate a policy on intercultural dialogue, institutions would need to allocate adequate resources. They would also need to build an institutional culture of intercultural sensitivity, which would value the contribution which students of different national, cultural, ethnic and religious background made to the institution and which would seek to integrate them in their life. To create a sense of belonging, in other words, or to create the conditions to be able to feel 'at home'.

Discussions only touched on the issues of staff qualifications necessary to implement a credible intercultural dialogue strategy. But there was an implicit agreement that professional development (training) measures should be made available, and that intercultural competence could play a role in staff recruitment.

A ninth conclusion concerns the warning not to dramatise intercultural matters, in order not to jeopardize a successful intercultural dialogue on campus. Delegates stressed that, after all, most intercultural encounters were successful. Failure to stress this could endanger successful attempts to deal with the really important cases of conflict, the major cases of the unresolved.

A tenth conclusion is this: the intercultural dialogue would need to find a place as a policy priority in the post-2010 agenda on the European Higher Education Area. This would be part of a necessary recognition of the wider role of higher education beyond the production and dissemination of knowledge and the advancement of economic objectives, or, to put it differently, of what was earlier referred to as the “European model of higher education”.

Recommendations

Based on the above observations and conclusions, the seminar delegates adopted the following recommendations.

Recommendation I

Intercultural dialogue as part of the public responsibility for higher education and research

Public authorities and institutional leaders should fully recognize the role of higher education in modern societies and develop policies aimed at fulfilling its whole range of purposes, as outlined in the Recommendation (2007) 6 by the Committee of Ministers to Council of Europe member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research. A key part of this responsibility is providing equal opportunities for higher education to students of various cultural backgrounds.

Recommendation II

The intercultural dialogue as part of institutions’ mission

The leadership of higher education institutions should include the intercultural dialogue as one of the missions of the university. They should consider the including intercultural dialogue in the mission statement of the institution, and they should allocate adequate resources (both financial and staff) to implement the intercultural dialogue. They should regard teaching and also research seeking to foster the intercultural dialogue on campus, as well as in broader society, as an integral part of the mission of higher education.

Recommendation III

Integration and valuing of students and staff with different backgrounds

The leadership of higher education institutions as well as student unions and associations should make it a priority to stimulate dialogue between students and staff from different backgrounds as well as to stimulate the participation of students in joint activities regardless of their background. Institutions and their students and staff should develop activities and policies which value the contribution students and staff of different linguistic, cultural, national, and religious backgrounds make to the institution and which seek to integrate them in its life.

Recommendation IV

Intercultural literacy as a core higher education aim

Public authorities and institutional leaders should see developing intercultural literacy as an important goal of the teaching and learning function of higher education, regardless of the disciplinary specializations of students. They should use the possibilities offered by credit systems to allow students to include interculturally relevant components in their study programme and, where needed, review regulations to make this possible.

Recommendation V

Intercultural training offers

Higher education institutions should make available to students, and particularly to staff, an adequate offer of training and professional development measures in the area of intercultural communication. Only with help of this sort will those willing to enter into the intercultural dialogue actually be empowered to successfully do so.

Recommendation VI

Development of a set of learning outcomes

The Council of Europe should explore the development of a set of learning outcomes and competences of particular relevance to the intercultural dialogue (also to help define intercultural literacy). It should likewise endeavour to collect, publish and share instructive examples of good practice on intercultural dialogue on campus. Likewise, didactical help materials for institutions should be developed, by the Council of Europe and other competent actors.

Recommendation VII

The intercultural dialogue as an element of the European Higher Education Area

While continuing with the necessary structural reforms, European governments should address and acknowledge, in the agenda for the European Higher Education Area, the contribution of higher education to the development and maintenance of broader society, which needs to balance economic and environmental sustainability with social cohesion and democratic culture. The intercultural dialogue must be part of this extended agenda for the European Higher Education Area.

Recommendation VIII

Research to foster intercultural dialogue

Public authorities and universities should stimulate research designed to produce new knowledge needed to foster intercultural dialogue and comprehension.