STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

Context and purpose

The Council of Europe’s Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR) reaffirms the strong role of education, not least higher education, in developing and fostering intercultural dialogue.

This is particularly pertinent in view of the emphasis on intercultural dialogue given by the Action Plan adopted by the Third Summit of Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe member states (Warsaw, 16-17 May 2005) and the Faro Declaration, adopted by European Ministers of Culture at the closing of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the European Cultural Convention (Faro, 27 – 28 October 2005). The CDESR also recalls that the European Year of Citizenship through Education, to which it contributed, as well as the pilot project on the University as a Site of Citizenship are highly relevant in this context.

The purpose of the present Statement is to outline the contribution of higher education to intercultural dialogue within the Council of Europe’s programme.

A tradition of intercultural dialogue

The world of higher education is a natural partner in intercultural dialogue because higher education has been international in its culture and essence since the founding of the first universities in the 11th and 12th centuries, and also because progress in research and teaching require open minds, a spirit of enquiry, readiness to cooperate across borders and a willingness to learn by exploring the unknown. No areas of human endeavour can be foreign to universities and other higher education institutions or to those involved in higher education in various capacities as researchers, teachers, students, administrative and technical staff members and policy makers.

The multiplier effect of higher education

The key role of higher education is further underlined by the multiplier effects of higher education institutions. In training future teachers and other professionals in a whole range of academic disciplines as well as in the role of higher education institutions and their students and staff in forming public opinion, the attitudes and values conveyed through higher education will be transmitted in very varied contexts and in all walks of life. The role of higher education in promoting intercultural dialogue therefore extends well beyond the number of staff and students engaged in higher education at any one time.
A dialogue built on values

Intercultural dialogue must be founded on a firm and well reflected set of values as well as on a willingness to consider the values of others and to reassess one’s own convictions in the light of new and convincing evidence. Dialogue presupposes openness of mind in all partners, including the capacity to look at their own values and frame of reference with critical distance. These are also essential values and characteristics of higher education.

European higher education is based on the conviction that each human being has intrinsic value as an individual, and also that each human being is inherently responsible for the development and well being of other human beings, of human society as a whole and of the environment on which we depend for our survival.

The CDES is committed to the Council of Europe’s key values human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In this context, the CDES sees the main contribution of higher education – as well as the main contribution of other areas of education – as helping develop, maintain and transmit to new generations the democratic culture which is indispensable to making democratic institutions and democratic laws work and to make democratic societies sustainable.

Higher education is further committed to the pursuit of knowledge unhindered by established dogma or schools of thought and to judging ideas on the basis of their merit as well as to ethical reflection and behaviour. The implementation of these essential values requires freedom of teaching and of research, freedom of organization and freedom of movement for members of the academic community. These are also essential prerequisites for intercultural dialogue.

Higher education is committed to dialogue with those whose convictions differ from our own, as a means of increased understanding and of resolving conflicts by peaceful means. These fundamental values underlie the international cooperation, throughout Europe as well as with other parts of the world, that is part and parcel of the heritage of higher education. They underlie the setting up of the European Higher Education Area by 2010 as well as the relationship and cooperation between the European Higher Education Area and other regions.
The higher education contribution to intercultural dialogue

Within its pan-European framework

Europe is a unique balance of what we as Europeans have in common and the various cultural traditions that make up an important part of Europe’s richness. The CDESR, as a unique platform of representatives of higher education institutions as well as public authorities of 49 countries and with the active participation of students and other partners, provides a singular opportunity for intercultural dialogue in a pan-European context. This is an important feature of the CDESR plenary sessions as well as of the activities of the Steering Committee. Arriving at a common platform on topics such as the public responsibility for higher education and research, higher education governance, the recognition of qualifications, access to higher education and the heritage of European universities would be impossible without engaging in intercultural dialogue.

The Council of Europe has played a fundamental role in opening the most important process of higher education reform – the Bologna Process – to all countries of the European Cultural Convention that commit to implementing the goals of the Process. The Council of Europe continues to play a leading role in integrating the newest members of the Process – the countries of South East Europe and the Newly Independent States that joined in 2003 and 2005 – fully into the European Higher Education Area.

Beyond Europe

Beyond its pan-European framework, the Council of Europe’s higher education programme contributes to intercultural dialogue through:

- participation in the working group addressing the relationship between the European Higher Education Area and other parts of the world (the working group on the “external dimensions” of the Bologna Process);
- participation in the UNESCO Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education;
- advice on the setting up, in the framework of the UNESCO Regional Convention for the Mediterranean, of a network of national information centres on recognition and mobility in the Mediterranean region, modelled on the European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC Network);
- advice on the review of the UNESCO regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications, based on the experience of the Council of

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1 International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and Europe States bordering on the Mediterranean (1976).
Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region;

- *ad hoc* presentations and discussions of European higher education policies in appropriate fora in other parts of the world;
- publications on various aspects of European higher education policies, through the Council of Europe Higher Education Series;
- inviting representatives from other parts of the world to participate in CDESR activities;

**Future possibilities**

The Council of Europe’s key contribution to the European Higher Education Area and as co-secretariat, with UNESCO, of the European Network of National Information Centres on academic recognition and mobility (ENIC Network) will alone ensure that the CDESR will play an important role in intercultural dialogue within as well as beyond Europe in the years to come.

However, depending on the extent to which the necessary resources can be identified, the CDESR would like to increase its engagement in intercultural cooperation, in particular through:

- inviting partners from outside Europe to contribute to and participate in the new project on *The University Between Humanism and Market: Redefining Its Values and Functions for the 21st Century*, which will be launched in 2007. This project will consider the role and mission of higher education in the context of our changing political, social, cultural and technological environment. Intercultural dialogue is an integral part of this context, including the fostering of the required skills, competences and attitudes through higher education and research. The project will be relevant for other parts of the world and will also benefit from such participation;
- the setting up of a university network focusing on intercultural dialogue, as proposed by the Russian Chairmanship of the Council of Europe;
- the organization, in cooperation with ALECSO\(^2\) and other appropriate partners, of conferences and activities on higher education policies and reform, including at least one conference at political level;
- cooperation with the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, where the Memorandum of understanding between the Council of Europe and the Foundation makes reference to higher education policies, in particular relating to mobility of students and staff and to the interaction between the European Higher Education Area and the southern Mediterranean states;

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\(^2\) Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization
• continued commitment to developing cooperation and understanding between European higher education and appropriate partners from other regions;
• in particular, seek to develop dialogue on higher education policies and reform with partners from Central Asia and Latin America.

In fulfilling its mission in promoting intercultural dialogue within and beyond the international community of higher education leaders, staff and students as well as representatives of public authorities, the CDESR will seek to further the values to which European higher education is committed and on which the Council of Europe is founded. The CDESR will seek to do so in cooperation with appropriate partners, in particular UNESCO, European and international organizations of higher education institutions and students, appropriate regional and international organizations, institutions and the public authorities of member states.