

## **NEW CHALLENGES OF GEOGRAPHY IN CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ASSOCIATION WITHIN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA**

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### ***Abstract***

#### **New challenges of geography in cultural and institutional association within the European higher education area**

University of Maribor has in the last few years been an active partner in establishing and encouraging regional cooperation within Danube Rector's network and Alpe-Adria network. Geographers have helped form the policy and concepts of regional partnership and connecting of spatial projects and initiatives, particularly in the regions of Central Europe and Western Balkans. An example of good practice is the Central European network GEOREGNET, which enables mobility of professors and students and contributes to the understanding among people and cooperation in higher education.

The new challenges of Geography in the establishment of Euroregions and formation of a European cultural area represent a new understanding of the importance of creating a network of institutional cooperation and education of geographers. Research and pedagogical work in the field of Geography enable development and implementation of internationally comparable post-graduate study programmes and research programmes.

With the establishment of University Centre for Euro-Mediterranean Studies, Slovenia has assumed the responsibility and an active role in encouraging the cooperation of higher education institutions in order to accomplish the goals of the European higher education area and strengthen intercultural understanding, not only between the countries of Euro-Mediterranean region, but also in the sense of global regional associations.

#### ***Key words***

regional partnership, universities' networks, intercultural understanding, global associations, challenges of Geography

## **1. Introduction**

The idea of a united Europe as a political and economic community originated in the European peace processes after the World War II with the intention to reach a complete thinking, decision-making and acting in the interest of common development. The rapid economic growth in the USA, the increasing Asian labour- and technological superiority of the recent past had strengthened the conviction that the European space has to be a knowledge-based competitive region in the world. The states have decided to combine their creative and innovative potentials in seeking for a firm alliance focused on searching for optimal synergies between national and European solutions, especially in the academic and research areas.

European unity, especially after Maastricht and Nice, does not concern solely geographical or historical factors, but insists primarily on a cultural and institutional affiliation with Europe. In other words, geography and history are indispensable conditions for a European identity, but as European unification is mainly an institutional and cultural process, belonging to Europe is evaluated today by taking into consideration institutions and culture (Marga 2006).

In the Lisbon Strategy, the Heads of the EU member states have committed themselves, and have confirmed their commitment in the renewed Lisbon Strategy, to defining the investment in human resources and development of active and dynamic social states as key priorities in creating a knowledge-based economy. This meant that the commitment of the Member States to giving encouragement to and promotion of lifelong learning as one of the highest priorities reflects recognition of the fact that permanent development of skills is the primary factor in the overall increase of employability. Slovenia must also find effective and systematic ways of achieving its national goals in the framework of common European policies, strategies and regulations. To foster Slovenian economic growth, it is necessary to increase the effect of domestic and foreign knowledge. The basic change to be achieved in the field of education was reinforcing cooperation between research, academic and economic institutions. Joint efforts of experts and economists in developing new technological, organizational, design, marketing and other solutions was the best way to greater innovation and faster technological development of the economy (CEC 2006). The goal was to create an effective and open "innovation system" for interactive cooperation between key stakeholders, to create a stimulating environment, to encourage the Bologna reform of the existing universities, to create new, smaller, specialized institutions of higher education, and to promote interaction between educational and research institutions in the private and public sectors.

Cooperation also brought other advantages, such as better visibility of Slovene higher education institutions. In order to successfully respond to new needs and expectations of society, the universities will be faced with changes in the principles of their management, with changes in their teaching methods, and with the introduction of strict quality assurance measures. To increase the effect of the educational role of the universities, successful implementation of the complex Bologna reform will be a necessity. Research in higher education will be strengthened through its links with research facilities in the private sector, through innovations transfer, and with the use of applied research in technological development. To enforce education and research activities at the universities it was necessary to encourage cooperation as well as competition among universities and

other institutions. Paradoxically, excellence and competitiveness were often achieved through cooperation with competitors. In the near future the most significant role will be played by European cooperation and excellence developing programmes in all fields of education and training supported by the European Structural Funds.

Slovenian higher education area seeks for new opportunities for regional cooperation for the providing of its larger productivity. Slovenia recognizes its development possibilities in the creation of university networks within individual European regions. Slovenian universities have been traditionally connected to cooperation with the higher education space of South East Europe. In the same way as the country, also the universities saw their role of a bridge between the West and Central European as well as South East European universities. Especially after 1991, numerous bilateral agreements on scientific and technological cooperation enabling cooperation within joint research projects, postgraduate research education and mobility of researchers were signed. Slovenian universities followed the international strategy being oriented towards supporting reforms in education and inclusion of the countries of South East Europe into the European flows. The South East European region is a term defining a geographic space and probably still represents one of the most critical and vulnerable regions in Europe. European unity, especially after Maastricht and Nice, does not concern solely geographical or historical factors, but insists primarily on a cultural and institutional affiliation with Europe.

## **2. Regional partnership**

University's mission is to improve higher educational cooperation in the field of education and research already based on bilateral and multilateral, as well as inter-university agreements. This will be useful for our institutions, as well as our countries.

European institutions build the realization of the goals of the "most competitive knowledge-based economy" by the so-called "soft acquis" through a string of documents – conventions, recommendations, declarations being in line with three priorities:

- Improvement of quality and effectiveness of the educational and training systems,
- Increase of accessibility of education and training, and
- Opening of educational and training systems for the environment.

By Slovenia's entrance into the European Union it can be established that in the Slovenian higher education area the fundamental challenges of the declaration by European ministers of education for education to create the Europe of knowledge and to strengthen its intellectual, cultural, social, scientific and technological dimensions. The foundation for realization of these goals represents the renewal in the middle of the nineties based on the guarantee of university autonomy, publicity and responsibility for their actions deregulation in connection to principles of autonomy, the right to choice of studies under the same conditions, connection of education and research activities as well as the possibility to establish public and private higher education institutions. The basic intension was the creation of a dynamic system guaranteeing quality, enabling a wide accessibility of studies and enhancing knowledge transfer from higher education institutions to economy.

Since the start of the renewal of higher education until today, in addition to the gradual realization of the set goals, different discussions at individual universities are taking place in the broader academic community and within state institutions in connection to the transition process in the state as an integration process of the European region.

In this surrounding, the system of effective and fair recognition put in front of new challenges of ever changing educational systems, the increasing diversity of »tailor-made« programmes at all levels of education and on the other side in front of the increasing mobility of not only students and academic staff, but also an increasing mobility of institutions and programmes. Today's Europe (geographically seen in the context of the Council of Europe) offers students exchange projects, joint degree programmes disregarding political and geographic borders (joint degrees, transnational education), new forms of teaching and accreditation in education, and different forms of quality assurance, other or wider than those provided by the state as custodian of the public good and a carrier of public responsibility for the own educational system. Education exceeds all limits and enters all branches and all periods of our lives (lifelong learning).

General assessments indicate that Slovenia has a relatively well developed research and development sphere, comparable to the stages in other EU countries, in spite of the fact that it is being criticized for not being problem-oriented enough, i.e. it is not enough focused on the needs of the economy and the social surrounding. Creation of an innovative surrounding is especially dependent on higher education institutions. Slovenia, much in the same way as Europe, lacks strength in translating innovation inputs, such as research and education, into innovation outputs, in particular new products, services and patents. Slovenia's universities need improvement in relationship between universities and industry. Universities need to open up to the business community and to respond to market demands. This means being open to approaches that cross disciplines, or combining them in different ways.

### **3. EU programmes and institutional networking**

The orientations of the EU Commission for the improvement of realisation of the Lisbon Strategy that is, in fact, not working exactly as planned, which, nevertheless, does not reduce its meaning or even brings it into question. Lisbon Strategy determines the orientations, under which Europe works. It exactly determines the needs of Europe, enhances excellence in the field of research activities, supports the highly set standards in the field of education and creates a space and conditions for creativity and innovation. Universities need to adapt to the needs of economy and to become more open for new approaches in regard of different disciplines among each other. Universities unite in three major fields that decisively influence the realisation of the Lisbon goals – education, research and innovation. Their association and combining is a great challenge to be successfully resolved only if they will have the broadest support and understanding by the surrounding and society, in which they act (Potočnik 2006).

The European Union provides different measures to enhance the cooperation between the accessing countries in fields, where the goal of individual programmes was to reach immediate influence of universities on the growth of the economic sector. The Socrates-Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, TEMPUS and Marie Curie

programmes, having an important role in strengthening the European dimension by helping mobility in the higher education area, need to be mentioned. The European mobility programmes enable the students, researchers and academic community joint cooperation in the educational and research work and guarantee comparability of their work and quality. But, as already a study by EURODATA indicated, the EU is lacking behind the set benchmarks. The mentioned study shows that approximately 25% of all global mobility is realised by the USA. It also shows that organized mobility within programmes like Socrates-Erasmus encompasses only about 5% of the total mobility. Problematic regarding the set benchmark of 10% student mobility set in 2000 is the fact that the natural migration by the population is in total about 3 to 4%. So, the benchmark exceeds the natural willingness of the population to be mobile three times. Perhaps the goal is set too high, especially regarding the fact that the estimated funds needed will not be provided by the EU. At the conference about financing the set goals of the Lisbon Strategy or the Bologna Process, respectively, in Belgrade in February 2006, it was told that 3% of the national GDP of each country should be invested in education, but in best cases, only 1% is provided by the public hand. This number is confirmed also by the European Commissioner for science and research and obviously, the universities will have to get the lack of funds from economy, mainly by developing attractive projects in applied sciences and tailor-made education and training of human resources for the private investors in higher education. The quality of work of higher educational institutions, their association with economic institutions and the reciprocal transfer of knowledge is the only ones providing their competitiveness in the European and in global space, as the public hand does not seem to be ready to cover the necessary financial input.

Programmes such as PECO, COPERNICUS, COST, EUREKA and the framework programmes in the field of research and development enable the accessing countries the introduction and strengthening of cooperation between research, education and the economic sector on national and European regional levels.

Experience shows that most projects in single scientific disciplines are designed traditionally and are slowly being reformed into the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary projects. The dimensions recognized as priorities are:

- Reciprocal acting of the European research and higher education area as the essential mechanism and firm fundament for the human resource development and the development of social capital and society as a whole;
- Recognition of the regions as innovative, knowledge-based units with own itineraries reflecting the strategy and logics of national priorities;
- Necessity of strengthening cooperation between universities in bilateral, multilateral and regional frames.

With regard to the mentioned, the national strategies brought important initiatives for a more intensive and sustainable association of basic and applied research and the practical transfer of results into the economic and regional surrounding:

- Equal cooperation in the VII Framework Programme,
- Strengthened cooperation in the Bologna Process, especially in the field of quality assurance, recognition of ECTS, as a precondition for the harmonization, mobility, comparability and attractiveness in the European higher education area,
- Adoption of a unified programming document enabling Slovenia to benefit from the European Structural Funds. These are focused mainly on providing

balanced regional development with strengthening of the equilibrium between the execution of and the initiative for education (with special emphasis on the university postgraduate studies) and the necessary economic development and enhancement on the labour market.

For a successful regional cooperation in the common European Higher Education Area we will still need to overcome numerous obstacles, beginning with the adaptation to national priority research fields to those of the European Union, opening of the national research programmes to researchers from the EU and beyond.

In the recent years several initiatives were launched for the enhancement of the South East European region. Some of them still prevail and try to adapt to the new challenges. Among these, there is the Stability Pact called also the Graz Process and Enhanced Graz Process with different projects, for instance, projects for the development of distance education. Five North Italian research institutes form a consortium uniting members from Central and South East European countries called CEEUN (Central and East European University Network). Prominent and successful international networks such as Coimbra Group<sup>1</sup> and Santander Group are also in the process of integration of Central and South East European universities. A network initiated also by the University of Maribor is the ALADIN network for the development of electronic applications in cooperation between universities and economy.

University of Maribor is the partner in two regional initiatives with a successful active cooperation. The first is the Central European Initiative, the result of which is an exchange programme in higher education called CEEPUS (Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies). The GEOREGNET network was established in the academic year 2006/07 to promote partner cooperation and mobility of students and professors of geography.

Today, the network comprises geography departments within thirteen universities from nine countries. It enables semester mobility of students, invited lecturers, bilateral projects in various areas of research and international publications in journals of partner institutions.

Another important regional initiative is the Adriatic Ionian Initiative UNIADRION that has most difficulties providing the financial resources for the start-up needs. The Alps-Adriatic Rectors' Conference was established within the Alps-Adriatic Working Community in the seventies of the preceding century and is still in the transition towards a scientific network with a scholarship system and joint research projects.

The annual Danube Rectors' Conference and Assembly took place in Maribor in 2006. This conference was established in 1983 and has always pursued the goal to include the former Eastern block states to the European Higher Education and

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<sup>1</sup> In the academic year 2008/09, the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor will start to implement a module entitled *The EU and the Western Balkans: the socio – economic outlook* of the joint Master's Study Programme in European Studies, the Process of Building Europe, which includes the universities of Siena, Salamanca, Coimbra, Strasbourg, Krakow, Athens, Hannover, Oradea and Montpellier. The Master's study programme was established in 2000 with the support of the European Commission, and in 2007 it was awarded a silver prize for lifelong learning. The study programme enables students to acquire deep knowledge of themes related to the process of building Europe through an interdisciplinary approach, while studying at different universities.

Research Area, especially regarding the preservation of a unique European cultural space. This conference set various important goals and its conclusions indicate that:

- The universities of the Danube Rectors' Conference shall offer information and support the development of joint research projects, especially within the VII Framework Programme in all fields of common interest, where also junior researchers and economists will be included in the scope of knowledge transfer between universities and economy.
- The universities of the Danube Rectors' Conference shall mediate new knowledge developed in joint research to students from the Danube Region in the framework of joint study programmes, where the best teachers will be combined. The universities, together with economy, shall develop student programmes, foster recognition and evaluation of achieved study results by spreading the Bologna reform in the region, where they are active and transfer knowledge from the universities to economy in a way that human resources will be developed in order to guarantee sustainable development of the Danube Region.
- The care for and assurance of quality in all activities of higher education institutions within the Danube Region is the fundamental precondition for competitiveness and the development of cooperation in the Danube Region, the European University area and globally.
- The students and junior researchers have an important role in the realization of the Bologna Process and in the including in the research area. The universities of the Danube Region shall enable their mobility, participation in the decision-making on the Bologna reforms, cooperation in the development of a quality culture and reaching of the European dimension in education and by this the formation of the European University Area.
- The international relations offices of the universities of the Danube Rectors' Conference foster joint projects and are experts and coordinators of their administration, as well as competent for mobility of students, staff and researchers. Therefore, they need to have according authorizations and resources for the realization of their tasks encompassing consulting, supporting and managing activities of the Danube Rectors' Conference. The international relations offices and other offices have to be educated for the project work of the Danube Rectors' Conference permanently, keep each other mutually informed and meet in joint conferences.
- The universities of the Danube Rectors' Conference unite in the mentioned activities and the formation of the common cultural area as determined in the Bologna Declaration, as well as foster the promotion and joint appearance of this cultural area in the world as competitive and attractive higher education area within the European and global higher education area.

#### **4. Global cooperation**

In the international space there are many actors and international organizations, such as the EU, OECD, UNESCO, World Bank and the Council of Europe which are involved in and cooperate in decisive matters in regard of education. The meeting of partners of the world conference organized by UNESCO was based on the principles of the World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century. It emphasized the challenges faced by higher education in changing the increasingly globalized world. The most important fundamental moves in higher education in the context of the globalized world were defined:

- The increasing relevance of the knowledge-based society and economy,

- The formation of new trade agreements including trade of education services,
- Innovation associated to innovation and communication technology and
- The stressed role of markets and market economy.

OECD especially emphasized the role of higher education as an excellent factor of the socio-economic development. It warned of the new challenges in financing and management, and special attention was paid to the question of accessibility and equal opportunities of an increasing number of students, new demands in research and the creation of new knowledge. As one of the newer studies emphasizes: "Higher education took over new responsibilities, not only the transfer of knowledge for the knowledge's sake alone, but takes over responsibility for the providing of human resource and the creation of new knowledge".

University of Maribor is a partner institution of the University Centre for Euro-Mediterranean Studies (EMUNI), established in 2008. The goal of the Centre, with its seat in Slovenia, is to encourage cooperation of partner institutions and universities in higher education in the Euro\_Mediterranean area in accordance with the objectives of Catania declaration (2005) and Cairo declaration (2007). EMUNI's mission is to structure a network of cooperation among countries of the Euro-Mediterranean area, spread intercultural understanding and, through cooperation of partner institutions and universities, develop and implement internationally comparable postgraduate study and research programmes and thus establish the Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education, Science and Research Area.

Faculty of Arts of University of Maribor cooperates with CMU – Community of the Mediterranean Universities / Jean Monnet Euro-Mediterranean Centre of Excellence / University of Bari in the preparation and implementation of joint Master study programme Master in Culture and Tourism.

Throughout the world, the higher education agenda is much wider than ever before, which makes the management of higher education face a much higher responsibility and the possibility of choice. In spite of the fact that teaching and research remain the main activities, their nature and methods of forwarding change regarding the needs of the students, employers and users of knowledge and financers of research.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

In conclusion, I would like to point out that the EU membership, and belonging to a wider community through development of shared values and interests should not be confused with uniformity; it should be interpreted as an effort to establish a cultural dialogue while respecting different national identities. The meaning of the parallel association of multiple identities should mean the development of different aspects of our human dimension and not the loss of it. In this context, regional cooperation is of vital importance, since it includes the flexibility of bilateral and the vision of multilateral cooperation. Here, the philosophy of thinking globally and acting locally can be effectively realized.

An expansive internationalization brings along risks and opportunities for the institution, as well as for each individual. Along with the increasing internationalization of higher education the institutions have to clearly define their

own identities, missions and strategies and take responsibility for their own development.

Europe will not be able to compare with other parts of the world, if it is not be able to ensure coherent development of its regions and overcome the problems of inner separation between the developed and the undeveloped or minor regions. Only a united Europe with sustainable and peaceful development will be a reliable partner to the other players in the global higher education.

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## **NOVI IZZIVI GEOGRAFIJE PRI KULTURNEM IN INSTITUCIONALNEM POVEZOVANJU EVROPSKEGA VISOKOŠOLSKEGA PROSTORA**

### ***Povzetek***

Univerza v Mariboru je bila v zadnjih letih aktivni partner pri vzpostavljanju in spodbujanju regionalnega sodelovanja v Podonavski rektorski mreži in mreži Alpe-Adria. Geografi so sooblikovali politiko in koncepte regionalnega partnerstva in povezovanja prostorskih projektov in iniciativ, zlasti v prostoru Srednje Evrope in Zahodnega Balkana. Primer dobre prakse predstavlja srednjeevropska geografska mreža GEOREGNET, ki omogoča mobilnost profesorjev in študentov in prispeva k medsebojnemu razumevanju med ljudmi ter krepi sodelovanje v visokem šolstvu.

Novi izzivi geografije pri vzpostavljanju evroregij in oblikovanju evropskega kulturnega prostora pomenijo novo razumevanje pomena vzpostavljanja medsebojne mreže institucionalnega sodelovanja in izobraževanja geografov. Znanstvenoraziskovalno in pedagoško delo na področju geografske znanosti omogoča razvoj in izvajanje mednarodno primerljivih podiplomskih študijskih in raziskovalnih programov.

Z ustanovitvijo University Centre for Euro – Mediterranean Studies pa je Slovenija prevzela tudi odgovornost in aktivno vlogo pri spodbujanju sodelovanja visokošolskih institucij za uresničevanje ciljev evropskega visokošolskega prostora, krepitev medkulturnega razumevanja ne samo med državami evro-sredozemskega prostora, temveč tudi pri globalnem regionalnem povezovanju.