

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION
ADOPTED BY PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING
“STRENGTHENING HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN SOUTH EAST
EUROPE - PRIORITIES FOR REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN COOPERATION”**

Vienna, 3 March 2006

INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans countries have great potential in spite of the scale of the challenges still facing universities. Despite the problems, governments, higher education institutions and students share the common objective of creating a European Higher Education and Research Area, and of supporting the fundamental premises of the Lisbon Strategy that knowledge societies and economies can only be realised through strong and socially responsive higher education institutions. While these goals are shared throughout Europe, they are particularly pertinent for the Western Balkan countries. **Growth and the creation of jobs is of the utmost urgency and action is required now if this is to be achieved. Therefore priority has to be given to increasing investment in higher education and research now as a key long-term strategy for the region, in order to meet both the current and emerging needs of citizens. All stakeholders should be involved in this process. Universities accept the challenge; action is required by governments at national, regional and European level.**

1) Implementing the Bologna Process

A strategy to improve dramatically the numbers of students acquiring quality higher education degrees is essential if the Western Balkans countries are to be able to compete and cooperate in Europe. Developing higher education systems offering more opportunities and a more diverse tertiary education provision should become the basis for European and regional cooperation. Indeed universities in the region fully accept their responsibility in enabling this European future to be realised, and recognise that structures and models that were appropriate in the past need to be adapted for the future.

Ministers in the region are strongly encouraged to follow up their commitment to European objectives by taking the necessary consequent action. Public funding should be provided to institutions to support European priorities, with incentives for successful implementation of Bologna objectives and to prepare adequately the participation of higher education institutions in the new programmes of the European Commission. Support should also be given to national teams of Bologna promoters to implement the key tasks of developing and disseminating knowledge about European higher education reforms and developments.

As part of their European commitment, **Ministers from the region are also encouraged** to consider areas where regional cooperation could be strengthened for the benefit of all. This is particularly important in relation to reaching the Bologna goals of developing quality assurance systems, and promoting the mobility of students, academic and administrative staff.

The universities in the region **urge EU Ministers to reinforce** their commitment to the social dimension in a perspective of cooperation and support between Bologna signatory countries. Inequality of opportunity exists not only within higher education systems, but also between them, and increasing the volume of targeted action to support institutions and students from the region in European cooperation programmes is urgently required.

2) Research and Innovation

The proposals in the recent EU Communication on the Western Balkan countries to increase efforts to support research and researchers are very welcome. Nevertheless the universities in the region consider that these efforts will need to be intensified if they are to be sustainable and stop the flow of qualified researchers out of the region.

One of the biggest challenges of successfully integrating into the ERA is the establishment of R&D infrastructures. This will contribute to the improvement of cooperation, communication and networking between European universities, research institutions and funding organisations. The universities in the region **recommend targeting specific support to R&D infrastructure development in line with the immediate priorities of the Accession and Pre-Accession countries.**

Furthermore **the universities recommend strengthening the participation of universities, research institutions and researchers from the Western Balkan countries in the 7th Framework Programme** through appropriate instruments. Given the importance of capacity building and human resources development, **special attention should be paid to reinforcing support to national contact points, and to the training of research managers.** New scholarship and mobility schemes should be established to enhance exchanges of researchers, teachers and students both between the Western Balkans and other European countries and within the region.

The role of higher education institutions in the knowledge triangle of education, research and innovation will increasingly depend on their closer cooperation with industry. Special support schemes should be developed to enhance applied research cooperation opportunities between higher education institutions in the region and developing technology oriented SMEs.

In view of the success of the SEE-ERA.NET (the European network for integration of the WBC into the ERA) project in establishing a sustainable network of institutions from the EU Member States, Accession and Pre-Accession countries, **partners are encouraged to support a new research cooperation support scheme with and within the region as a follow-up initiative.**

3) Consequences for Institutional Reform and Development

Implementing this higher education and research agenda implies rethinking the role of governments in relation to universities, as well as action at university level. Governments need to be encouraged to exercise trust in institutions, and to provide incentives for reform.

It supposes that higher education institutions develop increasingly in a European context through reinforcing cooperation, strengthening the European dimension, and taking account of good practice in a number of ways. This will require institutions that are autonomous and accountable to society, and committed to improving their governance structures and management, including taking care to involve students systematically.

Finally, to underpin and sustain this process, **governments in the region should continue to amend higher education legislation to integrate universities into one legal entity in order to accelerate the coherent implementation of the Bologna and European research agendas.** They should also seek to professionalise public management of higher education, for example through the creation of competent intermediary bodies for specific tasks, such as funding, research management and quality assurance.