UNICA RECTORS SEMINAR

Networking of University Networks: Synergy of Partnership

University of Belgrade

24-25 May 2018

Keynote speech, Friday, 25 May 2018, 09:15-10:00

Damir BORAS, Rector University of Zagreb

Why University Networks Matter? – Role and Impact
in EU and South East Europe

Distinguished Chairman, Rectors, colleagues and friends,

It is an honour for me to speak today at the UNICA Rectors' Conference as a key note speaker and address two topics of great importance: first, university networks and, second, the need for (stronger) networking of the existing networks. I will use this opportunity to briefly remind us all of the motivation behind the creation of European university networks and to share my thoughts on the future of university networks in South East Europe and in the EU.

On the Rise of Networks

As you know, the beginning of the European university networks dates back to the creation of the Coimbra group in 1985, which was soon followed by our own networks – UNICA and EUA. Today we are witnessing a rise in the formation of such networks on global scale. Over the past few years only we have seen several new networks in the EU – The Guild, UniLion and European Women Rectors Association, to mention only a few of them.

So why do we create such networks?

In an environment of globalization, internationalization and Europe-wide reform like the Bologna process, European universities, which often used to find themselves competing against one another in a struggle to attract students, donors, best talents and best research resources, are now seeking partnerships outside their country borders in order to meet the challenges and opportunities that internationalization and Europeanization of higher education offers. Cooperation is always more fruitful than competition.

Although the purposes of university networks can be very diverse and their scope can be national, regional, European or international, in all cases they share some similarities, the most important of which is their goal to provide the best educational and research

opportunities for their students and their staff. As a rector of the biggest Croatian university, I am very proud to see that we produce graduate students, teachers and researchers who are competent and brave enough to go into the world and learn to embrace all the differences, social and political, that they will encounter in their future lives.

But to achieve this primary goal of a university network we have to work together and share our knowledge, experiences and other resources. The prospect of sharing data, expertise, research know-how, helping other to further build important networks and exchanging connections is a great advantage that would otherwise be out of reach for a single university. We are here to make an effort to establish multilateral networks aiming to promote joint scientific projects and events, share best practice and cooperate on EU projects, as well as to establish common or joint course programmes and facilitate ever-growing mobility among researchers, teaching staff, students and administration. Our networks could also be committed to establishing and maintaining cultural ties through which we can promote modernization and internationalization of education and society.

Moreover, it is our duty to influence the European educational policy and other national and EU polices devised by the governments in each of our states that can directly or indirectly affect the higher education system in Europe. Therefore, we must act as an advisory, by presenting our views, recommend improvements to legal acts or their proposals, as well as lobby the government, national or international organizations and others who are involved with issues concerning universities and higher education policies for the interests of our universities. We must also use networks to present our scientific and education regions in the European and global arena. Personally, I believe that the region of South East Europe needs to be more present on the EU level and have better visibility in Brussels. As a rector of the University of Zagreb, I will make sure we will do our best to achieve that goal.

I am proud to speak on behalf of the University of Zagreb as a key note speaker at the UNICA Rectors' Conference. Our university is investing a great effort to be at the forefront of implementing current and future European policy and initiatives affecting higher education and research. I will just mention our great experience and increased motivation for advancements that we have gained from the participation in the European University Networks as an example. Through its work and contacts with the European Commission, Parliament and other key decision-makers, UNICA can ensure that all key stakeholders participate in universities' interests and concerns. In the years to come we will need to keep up and enhance our focus on key EU policies: the new EU budget is coming up, the FP9 program is being debated and Brexit is likely to have long lasting consequences on the European higher education. We must have strong and well-reasoned positions in order to successfully influence the European decision-making processes.

To sum up my presentation so far – university networks in Europe in the next decade have a clear agenda to promote and facilitate cooperation, support universities in their primary work, that is – high quality education, as well as to actively lobby for better legislation and wise spending of public money aimed at the advancement of higher education and research. Membership in different national, regional and international networks presents a complementary advantage to individual universities, any one of which may be a member of one or more alliances. And we must *think* upon and *act* upon those potential advantages.

On Regional Networks

Regarding our fairly large corner of the world, I will use this opportunity to mention the diversification in memberships across different networks. Universities of South East Europe have been active members of EUA, UNICA, Danube Rectors' Conference, The Guild and several other associations promoting cooperation in the field of education and science. In that sense we are not lagging behind the trends in the rest of the modern world. On the contrary, we are a home to a unique network, that is, the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education and Research.

The Platform is a unique cooperation format in our region that geographically includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Slovenia and Croatia. It brings together not only universities from our region but also ministries in charge of education and science, and executive agencies.

As I already mentioned, there are many networks of universities and many rectors today who have a high policy impact and influence in the EU, while others have a smaller EU impact but stronger national influence. I am not passing a judgement or making a scoreboard. Instead, I am simply stating that some networks are primarily oriented on work with national authorities, and some are more present on the EU level advocating for more funding and better legal frameworks. To achieve better synergy, we believe that a combination of the two is needed. Accordingly, the Regional Platform is intended to combine the following three elements: (1) working with national ministries and agencies, (2) working in the region, and (3) cooperation between our universities. Hopefully we will soon make a mark in Brussels.

Our goal is not to become (or: only to become) another university network on the map. Our goal is to create a dynamic inter-university instrument of trust with a purpose of enhancing the quality of education and research through self-organization and internal reform. The core of this "circle of trust" are of course universities of the capitals of the countries in the region, but we are open to all who are willing to accept certain standards. Those in the region who decide to join will have access to expertise, human capital and research resources of the largest and most developed universities who have joined the Platform. That is the added value of our Platform. And it is this approach that determines our positions on European initiatives such as the European University Networks.

Even though our network relies on intimate relations between our universities and its self-organization, a highest level of cooperation with the governmental bodies is essential for its success. Just as our universities cooperate on the horizontal level, so do the ministries on the regional level in order to achieve the best legislative solutions and share their knowledge and examples of good practice. In the region, we are too often prone to changes in regulation and novel strategic approaches to education after every election cycle. Thus one of the duties of the Regional Platform should be to overcome such issues with the least possible damage to higher education in South East Europe (SEE). Providing institutional memory is a good starting point for that.

In our forthcoming meeting in June we expect to adopt a policy document which will give a significant push for the Platform and its operation. Hopefully, a stable financing will drive the growth of the Platform and bring us closer to Brussels, providing us with the opportunity to

promote the higher education area of South East Europe as an integral part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to actively participate in EU decision making processes.

On European University Network

At this point, let me use the opportunity to briefly address the European University Network initiative (EUN).

First voiced by the French President Macron, the idea to create "European Universities" has quickly gained support in Europe. The concept is now being discussed on the EU level, as well as in the EU member states. Many university networks and rectors' conferences have already sent their first positions on the initiative, including UNICA. At the moment, the concept of creating "European Universities" is still very much in the making but the idea of creating a network of some 20 "European Universities" by 2024 appears to be acceptable to many actors in the field of higher education.

As a rector of the University of Zagreb and a member of the Croatian Rectors' Conference, it is my duty to also briefly inform you about the positions that I think should be supported by all major networks in Europe.

The European University Network aims to increase the number of students and researchers in the Erasmus+ program and also to support the development and implementation of a large number of cross-border and interdisciplinary / multidisciplinary joint studies among Member States oriented towards the needs of students and based on innovative methods. In addition, this initiative suggests that a better link should be made between education and research and easier acquisition of skills through work.

Considering that the public discussion on university networks is still in the progress, and that there are some open issues (such as criteria and funding), the Croatian Rectors' Conference, in the spirit of dialogue, has issued several recommendations for stakeholders in the process of developing national and European standpoint on the European University Networks (EUN). I believe that this position should also be supported by all our friends gathered here in Belgrade for this UNICA seminar.

As UNICA, but also as a Regional Platform, we should welcome the European University Networks initiative because it can:
- Contribute to strengthening the competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area, increase the number of students and teachers in mobility programs, help to create new partnerships, create better links between science, education and the labour market, and contribute to the overall development of higher education culture in Europe.
- Finally, it can further enhance European identity and the cohesion between universities through cross-border and multilingual cooperation.

However, for proper functioning of the European University Networks initiative certain criteria need to be defined:

- Firstly, we should call upon the key actors to elaborate the criteria and basic co-operation elements that would represent the minimum for successful creation of university networks, including a minimum set of constituencies (universities), criteria of excellence, different degrees of development/status of universities (to avoid

- elitism), common priorities and joint diplomas, joint research infrastructure, quality standards and project implementation experience.
- It is also important to take into account the national or regional context of higher education, including geographical criteria, to enable participation of at least one educational institution per country in European Networks
- We should also jointly push forward with the action calling for the inclusion of "third parties" in the European University Network – either as members of the European Network or an associate university. This would include institutions, professors, scientists and students from countries participating in the Erasmus program that are not currently EU members. We in Croatia particularly see this as a chance to include Southeast European countries who are already candidates for EU membership or potential candidates. And what better place for calling for such action than Belgrade!
- We should support the view expressed so far that the creation and expansion of networks should also be gradually built by using the bottom up approach considering the previous experience of existing European networks. This could also help avoid the "elitist" approach and enable everyone to participate equally.
- Regarding the financial burden, we welcome the fact that funding will be received from the Erasmus+ program, which will be doubled to more than EUR 30 billion in the forthcoming financial period. On the other hand, we should invite our national governments to prepare for national co-financing either from the national budget or European funds (e.g. European Social fund);
- We should call our national governments to conduct regular consultations with UNICA member Universities in their respective countries in order to ensure that national positions on the European University Network also reflect our member universities positions in as much EU member states as possible.
- We should call upon our members within UNICA and other networks like the European University Association (EUA) to start preparing for the European University Network by assessing the possibilities for cooperation with different universities in Europe. Successful project partnerships in EU projects can show us the way how to pursue cooperation in the future.
- And, lastly, UNICA should call upon all the European key stakeholders in the decision-making process to continue elaborating legislative and funding proposals, in cooperation with us, in order to achieve higher competitiveness of European higher education, increase mobility, develop new cross-border programs, and create a new and better culture of education and research, as well as appropriate attitudes towards higher education in the EU;

On Network of University Networks

Dear colleagues, please allow me to use the concluding minutes of my keynote to finally address the key element of my speech and next session, that is, the Network of University Networks.

Now that we have assessed the role and influence of European and regional networks, we should focus on the added value that this new layer of networking can bring.

Strong networks like UNICA, EUA, LERU, and the Guild entail different approaches to policy and the achievement of the mission and vision of our organizations. But, as I already mentioned, in spite of our differences, there is a strong similarity in what we want. In most

cases, we are all members of at least two if not more networks and in many cases we debate the same issues several times.

Therefore, a Network of University Networks is a great amplifier of our voices – whether we do it in Brussels or in our capital cities.

A Network of University Networks can be a great getaway for hundreds of universities all over Europe presenting a single voice in key initiatives and challenges. Many of those challenges lie ahead in years 2019 and 2020 – the new European Parliament, new European Commission, new legislative work programs, new budget and new funds, Brexit and more competition across the Atlantic and in Asia. All of this can be more easily addressed through a strong Network of University Networks. Speaking in a unique voice can assure greater levels of influence, whether we consult with European institutions or national governments. The bigger the network, the stronger the influence.

Also, a Network of University Networks can be a single point of entry for finding best partners for scientific collaboration, access to high quality research, higher education and most innovative institutions in Europe and the rest of the world. It can be a platform for knowledge sharing, presentations on strategic issues, peer to peer support, joint project proposals, debates, creation of policy positions, sharing of scientific intelligence and research infrastructure, networking (both personal and institutional) and, finally, platform for following and influencing policy affairs.

Dear colleagues, as I already mentioned, next couple of years will be challenging ones in the educational, financial and political sense. We must pull our ranks if we want to achieve what is best for our students, professors and institutions. Strengthening of our networks and supporting a Network of University Networks for better representation in Brussels and in our capitals is therefore a step in the right direction.

Dear colleagues and friends, thank you for your attention!