UNICA STUDENT DECLARATION

Rome 2010

UNICA STUDENT CONFERENCE 2010

249 students

**38 participating universities
from 30 capitals of Europe**

**4 days
10 conference forums:**

1. *Internationalisation at universities: challenges and problems*
   chaired by Marketa Tokova, former President of Erasmus Student Network.

2. *The European mobility programmes: toward the 20% mobility by
   the year 2020?*
   chaired by Veeli Oeselg, former Vice-President of Erasmus Student Network

3. *What is the role of the university in contemporary society?*
   chaired by Magnus Maines, European Students' Union

4. *Unity and diversity in future of Europe: the challenge of multiculturalism*
   chaired by Ewa Krzaklewska, former Vice-President of Erasmus Student Network

5. *Innovation, formal and informal education: can universities nurture the
   creativity of students?* chaired by Christoph Bachmann, Erasmus Student Network

6. *The Bologna process and the development of the European higher education:
   quality, employability and social issues*
   chaired by Francesco Planchenstainer, Italian Bologna Expert

7. *Student mobility and the enlargement and consolidation of the European
   Union* chaired by Karina Ufert, European Students' Union

8. *High quality universities with low fees: is it possible? How to choose the best university to study at?*
   chaired by Sarah Walk, Academic Cooperation Association

9. *Sustainable development and greener universities*
   chaired by Alice Cannone, former Erasmus Student

10. *Hard and soft skills: are the European universities helping the students to
    develop both?* chaired by George K. Charonis, European Students' Union

ROME DECLARATION

The declaration contained herein provides a written account of the key challenges, priorities and recommendations for higher education today, as seen through the eyes of the students from universityes in capital cities across Europe.

This declaration is a result of the UNICA Student Conference, held from 22 to 25 September 2010 in Rome, Italy. Over 250 students from more than 20 countries partecipated in discussions, shaping the recommendations below.

Discussions were centered on 10 topics, chosen by partecipants via electonic vote prior to the conference. Two topic recommendations have been merged into one section for the purposes of this document, due to their similar nature.

We, the students od the UNICA Student Conference identified and discussed the most important challenges facing universities and wider society today from our point of view and reached the following conclusions:

1. Multiculturalism

We live in a multicultural society that should allow individuals to profit from its diversity and guarantee equal rights to all citizens. Simultaneously, multicultural society needs to be workable, efficient and welcoming to all. To achieve this aim, changes are needed in areas of education, communication and policy. First, Europe should invest in multicultural education at all life stages, both within formal and informal education. Provision of targeted training to teachers and educators would allow development of curricula and inclusive teaching methods. Second, to open communication channels, multicultural interaction platforms and meeting spaces should be created, both in real life, in media and in virtual space. Immigrants should receive support to participate more broadly in society, by being given opportunity to learn the host-country language and through fair inclusion in the labour market.

Lastly, innovative public policies that support equality of opportunity should be developed. Wider participation could be guaranteed by pilot programs such as quotas (i.e., a certain percentage) of foreign citizens in the educational system and in the media. Fair job recruitment might be supported by usage of anonymous CV's and giving justification for refusals. Public institutions that fight against discrimination must be created and strengthened, and they should evaluate the implementation of policies and laws by other public bodies.

"Students must be fully involved in the development and in the application of the strategies and policies of our institutions"

Luigi Frati,
Rector of Sapienza
University of Rome

2. The role of university in contemporary society

The role of universities in contemporary society requires a broad approach exploring the challenges, trends, and ideas that are defining expectations towards higher education both from within the university, and in the broader society. The role of the university is in continuous development, though four topics should be in special focus;

To advance the mission of educating; universities should be more involved with society, for example, media can ensure better communication and cooperation between university and society. In order to abolish the 'Ivory Tower' between students and professors; students must have better interaction with professors and be involved in research. The result of education should not only be

well-trained professionals, but university graduates must be fully conscientious members of society; whilst the lack of

1practical education should be reduced by providing practical training to students according to their curricula.

Universities should have autonomy in defining their roles, however students and civil society representatives must be included in the governing bodies. To enhance autonomy of universities, it is necessary to eliminate of financial constraints through diversification of financial sources without reducing public funding.

Universities can be a key player in problem solving of global crises such as climate change, financial crises, inequalities and depletion of natural resources. Researchers should be involved and co-responsible for political decisions affecting problem-solution from local to global issues; at the same time a mutual relationship of universities and the public should be established in the way that graduates provide universities with new stimuli for their innovation, which can be enhanced through expanding possibilities for lifelong learning.

Access to higher education is not equal for all people in today's society. Inequalities of access to higher education are not only national challenges, as the percentage of students in the population is different from one country to another. To overcome this challenge, a European program of grants and scholarships based on personal incomes and life costs is recommended. To increase the attractiveness of higher education; better information must be provided to secondary school students. However, it must be a balance between quality and quantity of access, though the idea of excellence in education must not be based on an elite's formation, but in high teaching standards.

"*Universities have always been vital for Europe economies and societies and they are more so in these times of crisis*"

"*...we need to reform our universities and research centres and your ten topics have identified all the main reforms*"

"*The ten topics are a spot-on picture of the challenges and opportunities of Europe's higher education today*"

Androulla Vassilliou,
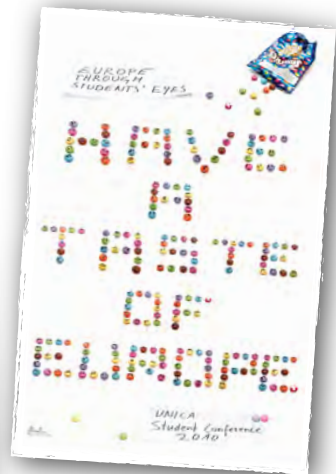Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, European Commission

3. Hard and soft skills, nurturing creativity

Given soaring levels of graduate unemployment and increasing frequency of job turnover among young people, today's graduates are faced with some of the worst employment prospects in history. The situation is exacerbated by graduates who are equipped with hard skills but usually lack the necessary soft skills. Universities must also nurture creativity by integrating informal education into formal education.

Therefore, universities should:

- Emphasize soft skills education within curricula by integrating hard and soft skills within all academic fields by improving teaching methods towards a student centred approach through the use of, for example, problem-based learning, essay writing, group work and discussions, role plays, presentations and diverse, innovative examination methods. Furthermore, flexible studying paths and environments should be provided.

- Empower students to further develop their soft skills and nurture creativity through informal education and by awarding degrees that include the regular credit requirement as well as recognition of co-curricular activities through requiring involvement in activities such as, for example, student politics, student interest groups, event organizing, hobby groups or University-based charities, that will be acknowledged by a document awarded by the group associated with the University. Moreover, universities' non-monetary resources (facilities, equipment etc.) should be estimated and used for extracurricular activities, with information regarding such activities to be accessible to all;

- Expose students to employment situations through student-oriented projects and by creating and maintaining strong links with the public and private sectors while cooperating with representatives of employers through the continuous implementation of workshops, case studies, research data and the possibility of internships. based competitions between and within themselves in a bigger scale and in every field on an international level to foster creativity and give birth to new and original ideas;

- Further nurture creativity amongst the wider academic community: institutionally, nationally and internationally by encouraging more cooperation within universities between all different actors and on different scales in order to favor the students position in a common decision making process. It needs to be interdisciplinary, international, time intensive and non-hierarchal between all participants of activities. Universities should also organizeprize-based competitions between and within themselves in a bigger scale and in every field on an international level to foster creativity and give birth to new and original ideas.

4. Student mobility and consolidation and enlargement of the European Union

Only by acknowledging the existing differences in member states can the consolidation process of the EU be realized and a way towards enlargement opened. In this process we see that student mobility has an important role to play, next to enhancing quality of education and opening up advantage of the diversity of the Higher Education systems. However to make mobility "work" it is important to stress on open access and successful completion of the study period abroad.

Therefore we find important:

- to stress the financial and cultural benefits for both the home and hosting countries, therefore showing the added value for mobility not only as an individual one, but also as a driving force for creating a consolidated European knowledge-based society;

- to improve the data collection on student mobility since existing data is limited to horizontal mobility, which does not represent the general trends and gives a false picture of mobility flows;
- to ensure that work periods abroad are recognized and thus funded as mobility to better prepare students for employability and investigate additional sources for funding by establishing links with the private sector;
- to provide clear and transparent information about mobility opportunities and benefits of study/ placement periods abroad in order to instigate students' motivation to experience it (can overlap with other "mobility topic");
- to make sure that full recognition of earned credits is secured in order to make the study period abroad academically meaningful;
- to address language issues (which can overlap with other "mobility

5. Internationalisation at universities: problems and challenges

Internationalization at universities should be an important focus for the universities of Europe, as it enriches the quality of education and provides students with richer course offer, language, social and cultural skills. We believe that an international university should value cultural diversity, inclusion, transparency and democratic participation. To be effective, it should be a part of the university strategy at all levels. The strategies and action plans must address the challenges of internationalization in a constructive and pragmatic way. It is important that the money for internationalization is earmarked during the budget process. In order to enhance the internationalization, we propose:

- improving the knowledge of English by students and teacher to increase the number of courses in English (through early start, subtitled movies, language learning within any degree);

- improving information provision (training for IRO staff, creation of an online European academic network for promoting cooperation and exchange among students, researchers and staff);
- increasing specialization through combining specialized degree programmes with fewer students at specific universities;
- increasing participation of students with disabilities by improving needed infrastructure.

- Supporting the integration of international students (both academic and social, with study support of mentors and tutors and possibility of anonymous feedback).

"I have always believed teamwork and joint efforts are great issues [...] times of crisis are best overcome if we stick together."

Renato Lauro,
Rector University of Rome Tor Vergata

6. Mobility programmes

Increasing the number of mobile students is essential for the development of the European youth since it creates personal and academic benefits. The 20% to 2020 goal is a visionary target to aim at. However, the quality and stability of the mobility programmes are more vital in contemporary society.

Participating universities are advised to have strong cooperation between ESN sections, student unions and international relations offices. Also the national governments should actively promote and encourage participation in European mobility programmes. Students should be encouraged to participate in mobility programmes in countries speaking uncommon languages.

4The European mobility programmes should have a fair financing system, which requires an additional fund providing extra support to students from European countries with a lower income and distribution of funds according to the academic performance and family income.

As high quality in the Erasmus programme starts with a good selection, future participants should be proficient in the language for their exchange studies. For this, students should benefit from language preparation before their stay abroad both in their home and host universities. Furthermore, Erasmus students should not get in the academic activities preferential treatment, but be treated as local students. In order to solve the problem concerning the recognition of courses already attended abroad, professors must commit to the learning agreement that they should be obliged to sign. The learning agreement must be a binding contract.

7. The Bologna Process

The development in quality of education driven by Bologna Process seems to have stopped after years of impressive innovation in the countries. Consequently the States should take further into account the assessment given by Stocktakings on the levels of implementation of the different aspects of the Bologna Process. There are evidences that there are people who even don't know the existence of Higher Education Area More so more information should be communicated to students and institution staff about the results of the implementation of the Bologna process and the system itself. The institutions should find ways to take into account the students' opinion with the help of student assessments on the correspondence of ECTS with workload and learning outcomes.

here is space for further and better implementation of Bologna Process at national levels. For instance Institutions should be urged to clearly define the learning outcomes of the study programs and the 3-cycle system should be subject-related and not country-related with equal standards for each subject (e.g. law, medicine) instead of length varying from country to country.

Universities and national bodies should valuate more some instruments of Bologna Process. According to our opinion the diploma-supplement should be standardized for all states and free of charge, whilst being clear on labor market. Furthermore, in the light of student-centered education, academic institution should include skills as a part of the university studies, such as optional internships. Moreover we believe that stronger commitment by states is needed. National agency should provide equal financial support for LLP Program (Erasmus) students studying in the same location should be promoted. Institutions should promote the access of minorities to university level studies, including them in the decision-making processes.

Further improvements are possible in the field of social dimension: we encourage states to provide easier access to mobility programs such as the LLP Program (Erasmus), to students from non-EU countries part of the Bologna Process.

"It will be through your energy and determination, your eagerness for change, novel ideas, skills and creativity, that our society our planet, our values will be changed and the future will be shaped.
A future that in fact largely belongs to you..."

Paolo Parisi,
Rector of Università degli Studi di Roma "Foro Italico"

8. Tuition Fees

We strongly believe that high quality universities are possible with low or even without fees, but only with sufficient and responsible public funding and the recognition of the importance of high quality universities in society. In our opinion, the most important markers of quality in higher education are: self-development, employability, mobility, research-based teaching and adherence to international standards. This can be achieved by cooperation, innovation, effectiveness, and motivated students and staff.

We oppose the current trends of university rankings as they are being developed to judge institutional quality—they are not sufficient to help students in choosing where to study. Quality assurance agencies, which should be entirely independent and include student representation, should publish reports on each university in a clear, readable way. Moreover, quality assurance processes should be fully transparent. Universities should implement change according to European and national standards as recommend through the quality assurance process.

We believe in a strong commitment to public funding of higher education in order to foster the aforementioned markers of quality, and more importantly to continue the democratic nature of higher education with equal access to all those qualified.

"You are here to offer decision-makers a declaration that reflects your point of view; fundamental point of view, through the students' eyes"

Guido Fabiani,
Rector of Roma Tre University

9. Sustainable development and greener universities

We, the students of Europe, demand a common action plan for a sustainable and green development to be implemented in every European university within the next two years. In order to achieve this goal, we urge for the creation of official European guidelines to support this process. The latter shall consist of several recommendations and examples of how to move towards sustainability and greener universities. We also ask for the election of committees for sustainable development in all universities in order to adapt the guidelines to every individual situation. In a close future, these committees should create a European network and share their knowledge. Most of all, we strongly recommend governments and universities to invest more funds into the research for alternative technologies and better resource management. These short term investments in sustainability rapidly lead to financial benefits and the improvement of general quality of life. We also believe that these investments are central to maintain the efficiency of our education systems. Moreover, universities should stand as examples in raising the student's awareness – and therefore the population's awareness – on environmental issues. We, the students of Europe, challenge the EU and our governments and our universities to transform these ideas into political practice as soon as possible.

"You're asked to see Europe -a serious game, as we saw before- through students' eyes, and students' eyes should be critical eyes"

Stavros A. Zenios,
President of the
UNICA network

UNICA Student Conferences

2008 → *"Let's Win Europe: Chances and Challenges for Young People"*

University of Warsaw, 24-27 September 2008

2006 → *"L'Université dans la cité - University-city-citizenship"*

Université Pierre et Marie Curie, 25-28 October 2006

2004 → *"Unity and Diversity in Europe: The question of Identity"*

University of Amsterdam, 27-30 October 2004

2002 → *"The future of Europe"*

University College London, 10-13 April 2002

2000 → *"The Making of Europe"*

Freie Universität Berlin, 21-24 November 2000