

# Interview with Prof. Dr. Maja Makovec Brenčič, Slovene Minister of Education, Science, and Sports

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*A new National strategy for the internationalization of higher education of the Republic of Slovenia for the period 2015-2020 is under preparation. What are the key new features in relation to the existing system?*

The national strategy of higher education follows the direction of the National program of higher education in order to enhance the quality of higher education through openness to the international environment. Internationalization is recognized as an integral part of an evolving higher education environment that ensures quality and sustainable development of teaching and scientific research as well as the development of any other segments that form the higher education area. An active participation in the international academic environment also promotes cultural, political and economic cooperation with other cultures and societies relevant for Slovenia, wherewith it is possible to circumvent the negative effects that may jeopardize smaller societies. Internationalization is currently an important topic as we are faced with a migrant flow, and it is through a true understanding of internationality that multiculturalism, adoption of diversity and respect of cultures can be strengthened. This is also one of the challenges of the strategy.

At this moment, an analysis of the achieved progress in the field of internationalization is being carried out both through the National program of higher education and as a reflection on the future development of openness of the universities as well as other knowledge institutions in the field of higher education. It deals with other strategic documents as well, such as Smart Specialization Strategy, Slovenia's Development Strategy 2014-2020, Research and Innova-

[92] tion Strategy of Slovenia 2011–2020, strategic international orientation of Slovenia in the field of foreign and economic policy and development cooperation, and other previously adopted internationalization strategies for the Slovenian higher education institutions.

The central objective of the emerging strategy is to make the Slovenian higher education system more appealing to foreign students, teachers, researchers and professional staff (a new feature, for example, is a visual identity and e-study in Slovenia, which is already used for the joint promotion of Slovenian higher education institutions at higher education fairs abroad), as well as to emphasise the omnidirectivity of internationalization, i.e. the domestic internationalization. Much of this is already underway, aimed at all students and higher education teachers and associates, i.e. those that are generally not physically mobile and therefore without any direct international experience.

Domestic internationalization draws on e-mobility and virtual mobility, it involves intercultural and global abilities and the development of soft skills based on high-quality, structured, integrated and systematically organized academic experience, which is embedded into the curriculum/programme that is internationalized to a greatest extent possible, a variety of extracurricular activities, the teaching process itself (e.g. visiting teachers, teachers from practice with international experience, problem-based learning etc.) and so on. Studies, especially those conducted among employers, show that graduates with international experience, which can be acquired in various ways – either at home or abroad, are more employable. Therefore, a diversity of ways for acquiring such experience should be made possible in knowledge institutions.

With the strategy, we want to change the majority opinion that mobility is in fact the most common form of internationalization. It is indeed one of the best achievements of the Bologna system due to its contribution to greater openness and interconnectivity of the higher education system in Europe and beyond. However, it is with the new strategy that we want to emphasize omnidirectivity as well as the diversity of promotion of various forms and processes of in-



ternationalization in higher education, including those that may be quite peculiar to individual knowledge institutions.

*How does the Republic of Slovenia understand the role of Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI) in the internationalization of higher education and science in Slovenia?*

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We see the role of EMUNI in the internationalization of higher education especially as a network organization, as a facilitator and integrator of interculturalism in the field of higher education and beyond. This means it is not only an individual higher education institution with its study programmes, but a focal and connection point for the Mediterranean countries, which could assist Slovenian higher education institutions in the establishment and implementation of cooperation at various levels, reaching from the programme, development and research level to the strengthening of intercultural behaviours and competencies.

*The draft of the abovementioned strategy targets priority regions, including the Euro-Mediterranean region among others. What concrete measures are planned for achieving this objective? Will this measure, for example, include the allocation of bilateral scholarships, which are allocated in 2014/15 to only a few European Mediterranean countries and Israel, and none to the Arab Mediterranean countries?*

Slovenia can offer its knowledge and development potential both, for the development of higher education and research area in its narrower and wider region, and as a facilitator connecting education and science with the economy. The Mediterranean region is also emphasized as an important region in the EU and receives a great deal of attention, in addition to the Balkans and Asia, in the framework of the international dimension of higher education in Erasmus+ programme, as well as allocated funds in the form of scholarships for the exchange of students and higher education teachers. Some countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain, have already expressed a considerable interest in deepening their cooperation with Slovenia; if the interests deepen and become more concrete in various forms of cooperation, we will, of course, also consider bilateral scholarships or other forms of cooperation.

[94] *In 2013, CMEPIUS conducted and published a study on the evaluation of the impacts of the Erasmus programme on higher education in Slovenia, and pointed out, among other things, that the state (universities, faculties) is not collecting data on students who took part in the academic exchange, which could help identify good and bad practices established at foreign universities. At the same time, the possibilities of addressing domestic students and diplomats are not explored as much, foreign students are not systematically informed about Slovenian history, culture and society, and Slovenia fails to maintain contact with them after the exchange. Do you plan to address these unexploited opportunities in co-operation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?*

The residents of the European Union have a right to study, live and work in another Member State of the European Union and around the world, which allows them to have direct experience and contacts with people of other nations and cultures. The systematic upgrade of the experiences gained in a foreign country, with high-quality access to intercultural and international competencies and their development, enables greater competitiveness for individuals in the international and global labour market and the labour market in general. This is confirmed by the studies on employment, especially of young people. For this reason, one of the proposals in the Strategy for the internationalization is the promotion of learning the Slovenian language and about the Slovenian culture among foreign students in Slovenia.

The strategy also emphasizes the importance of preserving the Slovenian language as a language of the professional sphere; it should remain the dominant language of teaching and research, despite the inclusion of intercultural and international dimensions to study programmes. In fact, a language can always be learned through cultural familiarization of the environment in which we live or where we place ourselves; this was actually a topic of discussion among the Ministers at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sports Council of the EU. And each of us has stressed how important it is to preserve the independence through history and learning the broader as well as the current context of a language, and also the im-



portance of learning foreign languages and teaching children about the diversity of cultures in their early years.

*The field of Slovenian higher education and science is relatively legally rigid when it comes to conditions of international cooperation. One of the most pressing issues is, for example the fact that the tender for foreign students is published in May for the following academic year, which is more than six months later than the standard date in countries with highly internationalized education. National legislation significantly restricts the accreditation of university programmes in foreign languages, the accreditation of joint programs with foreign partners is extremely difficult and time-consuming, and foreign scientists must overcome numerous administrative obstacles, which fall under the jurisdiction of different ministries, if they want to carry out their research in Slovenia. Does the ministry recognize these issues and are measures for their improvement being prepared?*

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The internationalization of higher education is a topic that the Ministry will address together with a working group of stakeholders in the novelation of the Slovenian Higher Education Act. We are also tackling the transition from the programme to institutional accreditation. Our aim is to thus open or at least slightly limit the 'rigidity' which you mentioned, and to transfer the autonomy of the programme development to knowledge institutions. This, of course, also means a transfer of the responsibility for the quality, openness, development, improving the knowledge of Slovenian professional, academic language, as well as strengthening of intercultural competencies.

We also want to support the development of transnational cooperation, as this is what provides and connects the transfer of new knowledge, new strategic partnerships, joint programs, diplomas. At the same time, knowledge institutions need to actively open their doors and build this culture of openness. Some of them are very active in this area, while some of them are still getting familiarized with the issue.

*How do you assess the issue of brain drain in Slovenia and what plans does the Ministry have in respect to the related measures, such as brain*

*circulation? Did the Ministry establish a mechanism for maintaining relations with Slovenian scientists-emigrants?*

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As history shows, brain drain was always part of global development and transfer of knowledge, and we can observe this today as well. Even our first academics, scientists, researchers broadened their knowledge abroad. However, it is important that such knowledge returns to its home creative, research and development environment, which must be interesting enough to attract it back. With this in mind, the Ministry is preparing measures with a focus on researchers at the start of their career to be brought closer to the economy. A lot is expected from the implementation of smart specialization strategies connecting the economy with science and research. It is in this area that I see opportunities for cooperation between young people and top-level scientists who wish to return to their homeland. Also, after years of decline, we are increasing funding in 2016 and 2017 for the field of science and higher education, thereby adding a dash of optimism to all those who believe in Slovenian scientific and research excellence and the quality of its higher education. We also strive to obtain funds via ERA-NET, HORIZON 2020 and other instruments that support science and research in the EU. Data shows that we were quite successful in this area, also when in comparison to other countries. In the strategy for the internationalization, we will ensure a place for Slovenian scientists around the world, and many of these activities are already in place at the universities and other knowledge institutions.

*Science became highly internationalized, especially in terms of scientific production, which could be described as industrial. We are seeing significant anomalies in the Slovenian scientific field that contradict common sense when assessing the relationship between the quality and scope of publications of scientific research (academic dishonesty, scientific publications with foreign publishers, cooperation of science and economy, scoring the scientific achievements). Does the Ministry address these issues and are you planning any measures in this area?*

We recently intensified, together with the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SAZU) and other stakeholders, the discussion on



ethics in science and on the establishment of an honorary panel in 2016. These discussions will certainly contribute to raising awareness and transferring good practices from the international environment, pursuing the values of science and strengthening its value and importance within the broader society. The Government already adopted the Strategy on open access to scientific data and publications; discussions on open science are becoming increasingly more relevant as well. ARRS (Slovenian Research Agency) recently began preparing the amendments on the scoring of scientific achievements within the framework of the steering group. At the same time, many measures aimed at bringing together views and common objectives through dialogue and knowledge transfer between industry and science have been prepared in the recent years. Even the strategy S4 has and will continue to encourage a more active dialogue and search for synergy effects between science, research and the economy sector, as well as non-economy sectors, i.e. in the field of social sciences. Some of these topics and the open dialogue will be promoted by a new act on research and development activities, which is currently being prepared at the Ministry. One of the aims of the new act is to respond, together with stakeholders, to the challenges that are facing modern science.

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