

EMUNI Annual Conference 2018

“The Future of Knowledge Institutions in the Mediterranean”

June 22, 2018

Piran, Slovenia

In line with the previous annual EMUNI conferences (“Migration, Diaspora and Brain Circulation: Drivers for EU-Mediterranean Cooperation”, 2016; “Youth, Employability and Entrepreneurship: The Role of Higher Education Institutions”, 2017), in 2018, on the special occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the Euro-Mediterranean University, the EMUNI annual conference encompassed again a wide spectrum of themes, looking resolutely forward to the evolution of higher education institutions in the Mediterranean region.

As the president of EMUNI, Abdelhamid El-Zoheiry, stated in introduction, “with the fourth industrial revolution, aka Industry 4.0, we are entering a new age”, and consequently “the field of higher education, which is already witnessing some dire challenges, will bear the brunt of this paradigm shift in the work environment”. This reminder of the current situation set the framework for the common reflection on “The Future of Knowledge Institutions in the Mediterranean”. More than twenty high profile speakers (from Egypt, France, Israel, Italy, Malta, Morocco, Palestine, Portugal, Slovenia, Tunisia) and more than a hundred active participants from all over the region took part.

Panel 1

“The structure of academic curricula: satisfying multi-disciplinary, life-long and employability needs”

Setting the scene, H.E. Hatem Atallah reminded of the power of education as success builder and social achiever. He noted that universities have throughout history played a central role as centres of knowledge and contributed to the reputation and economic development of the cities and regions where they were located. Today, societies continue to be the driving guide for the development of universities and the ultimate goal of their endeavours. He thus called for a close, continued and deepened cooperation between universities and civil society, including entrepreneurs and local governments. In order to unlock individual creativity and innovation, universities need open space and total autonomy, i.e. independence from the economic needs, financial constraints or political guidance.

The first session was devoted to the reflection of the structure of university curricula. It put into the centre the question of employability. There was a common understanding that this is a particularly essential issue in the context of the South Med, where youth who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) represent today more than 25 per cent of 18-25 years old in Southern European countries, and some 50 per cent in

Southern Mediterranean countries. To effectively address this “time bomb”, educational institutions must move away from programmes that are too theoretical and disconnected from real needs of populations. They must focus on developing concrete and practical programmes that are relevant to the Mediterranean countries’ needs and opportunities, among them “blue economy” (tourism, marine resources, etc.), nutrition, water, health, environment, [integrated urbanism and sustainable design](#) (which was the focus of a case study). The relevance of these programmes is here to stay. It is driven by climate change, digital revolution and related developments (artificial intelligence or internet of things), and geopolitical movements, including the rise of China and India, relative decline of the West, demographic growth of Africa, large migrations. In designing the programmes, a multi-cultural approach is absolutely needed and so is the facilitation of the North-South integration processes within the Mediterranean. Examples of these are large student mobility projects, joint courses, dual educational programmes (with double diplomas, etc.). EMUNI can be a source of inspiration for others and expand its approach. Some investment would be needed to document job needs and opportunities, develop exchanges of experiences, showcase success stories, launch pilot programmes and similar efforts. EMUNI could take the lead in setting off and coordinating such actions.

Panel 2

“Evaluating internationalization and charting its future”

The second panel included different points of view on internationalization and its future. Some common conclusions were drawn, particularly on the need to increase awareness of governmental institutions, to facilitate and support the internationalization process within academic and research organization, and to strengthen international networking. Internationalization of higher education in the Euro-Mediterranean region (both North-South and South-South) is fundamental to science diplomacy. It will increase mutual trust among nations, particularly when addressing important common challenges like resources management, food security, energy and migration. There are existing tools and programmes (Horizon 2020), including some that are explicitly addressed to the international cooperation with the Mediterranean countries (PRIMA, ENPI). More and better use of these instruments needs to be made. Good practices offered by projects and initiatives funded by these instruments still need to be explored further. National policies and governmental institutions (especially ministries of education and research) should play a pivotal role in pushing and preparing academic and research organizations towards effective international partnerships and consolidated exchange process. Academic and research organizations from non-EU Mediterranean countries need to become more attractive and prepared to host students and early career researchers from EU countries or from other continents. National governments should also work in this direction. A mapping and evaluation of ongoing internationalization practices would be useful, not least to identify some benchmarks for evaluating future actions. Visa for students and young researchers remains a problem, and need to be addressed more systematically and with political commitment. Efforts need to be directed into enhancing real cross-border and internationalized educational systems to replace current individual self-centred actions by countries in national educational or research programmes, as this is limiting progress in quality of education and research as well as innovation.

Panel 3

“Teaching a digital generation”

Panel 3 allowed a productive exchange on the educational consequences of the new potentials offered by the digital age we now all live in, as either students, teachers or researchers. Presentation of ideas came from professors, managers of universities, and representatives of consultancies. They discussed both technical and social implications of the new conditions of teaching the current digital generation, as well as the more general philosophical stances required by the generalized uses of information and communication technologies. Borrowing from the concept of “liquid modernity” (Z. Bauman), questions were asked about the new post-modern ubiquity syndrome and the effects of the speed of information. The new kinds of services that companies and start-ups can offer to institutions in order to help them to stay in tune with the technical progress were presented, including educational websites, and different technical ways to support students and researchers. Some innovations in teaching methods were also presented, like the organization of networks and the means necessary to implement efficient and recognized on-line courses. It was underlined that these systems must be accompanied by robust security measures to insure intellectual property and the credential of diplomas.

Concluding plenary panel

“Higher education in 2030: future directions and implications”

Following these discussions, leaders of high education or research institutions were asked to highlight the most important concept for the redefinition of higher education for the next decades to come. Their answers, based on their experiences and beliefs, resulted in the following keywords: 1) internationalization, 2) interculturality, 3) basic science, 4) research, 5) entrepreneurship. They all agreed on the necessity for their institutions to evolve in an international and intercultural context on and off campuses. They wish to keep alive rigorous teaching of basic sciences, given their importance in any innovation and engineering process, strong support for research, and development of a stronger link between entrepreneurship and academia. In conclusion, and as an immediate and concrete follow-up to the conference, the president of EMUNI made the proposition to create a Euro-Med foresight and monitoring group, with the idea that such a task force coordinated by EMUNI could work immediately along the lines described during the conference and implement some of its recommendations.