Rome Declaration

UNICA
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Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe

Official website:
www.unicaroma2010.it
Word from the UNICA President

When nearly 300 students from 38 leading Universities of 30 European capitals spend four days debating heatedly on the state of higher education in Europe, the result is certainly worth the reading. But even more than that: The students’ voice must be heard and seriously taken into consideration by policymakers. While the students themselves may be the least experienced among the stakeholders in higher education, they are certainly the ones with the highest stakes in quality education. What they lack in experience they make up in intense interest, keen intellect and the most potent force of all: enthusiasm. It is with these qualities that the UNICA Students debated on the issues that they themselves identified as the major issues on higher education.

Carefully prepared discussions, presentations from leading experts, long and lively debates and the hard post-conference work resulted in a paper that exhibits deep analysis, a broad understanding and density of clear messages. The Rome Declaration is an important document expressing the students’ voice in matters of higher education.

As the world in general, and Europe in particular, are going through a major and long-term economic crisis, matters of education require intense scrutiny. Education promises, yet one more time, to be a major force for getting our societies out of the current dire situation. In this challenge the UNICA students stepped in and made a valuable contribution. I congratulate them warmly!

I also congratulate the organizers of the Rome UNICA Student Conference: University of Rome La Sapienza, University of Rome Tor Vergata, Roma Tre University and the partner university, University of Rome “Foro Italico” for their superb organizational arrangements.

They created the perfect environment, combining intellectual stimulation and pleasant recreation, for producing the document at hand.

And to all the readers I wish bon apetit in savoring the intellectual appetizers served by the student in the Rome Declaration. Is it haute cuisine with youthful spice.

Professor Stavros A. Zenios
UNICA President
Message from Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth*

Dear students,

I commend initiatives like yours, which stoke the debate on Europe’s universities. I cannot think of debates that are more crucial for our future prosperity and social well-being.

Universities have always been vital for Europe’s economies and societies, and they are more so in these times of crisis.

Young people are being hit particularly hard by the crisis: among other things, it is a shock for me to think that about one European in five is unemployed.

A good study programme - exciting, challenging, and focussed on the students’ job prospects - is the best insurance policy you can get against unemployment and social exclusion.

And I’m not thinking about universities only: schools and training courses are just as important. All of Europe’s systems of learning must be involved.

So today - more than ever - we need to reform our universities and research centres. And your ten topics have identified all the main reforms. (...)

*Fragment of the video message Androulla Vassiliou, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth addressed the participants of the UNICA Student Conference 2010, 22 September 2010.
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 universities 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 participated in discussions, shaping the recommendations below.

Discussions were centered on 10 topics, chosen by participants via electronic 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 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:

- **Investment 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;

- **Opening of communication channels and creation of multicultural interaction platforms and meeting spaces** both physical as well as in the media and in virtual space. Immigrants need to receive support to participate more broadly in society, by being given opportunity to learn the host-country language and through fair inclusion in the labor market;

- **Development of innovative public policies that support equality of opportunity.** Wider participation must 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 the usage of anonymous CVs and the provision of 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.

1. Multiculturalism
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 broader society. The role of the university is in continuous development, though four topics should be in special focus:

- **Advancement of the mission of educating** by becoming more involved with society, for example, media can ensure better communication and cooperation between university and society. In order to abolish the ‘Ivory Tower’ perception 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 practical education should be reduced by providing practical training to students according to their curricula;

- **Autonomy for universities 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 financial constraints through diversification of financial sources without reducing public funding;

- **Universities are key players in problem solving of global crises** such as climate change, financial crises, inequalities and depletion of natural resources. Researchers must 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;
A European program of grants and scholarship based on personal incomes and life cost is recommended. Access to higher education is not equal for all people in today’s society. Such inequalities are not only national challenges, as the percentage of students in the population is different from one country to another. Furthermore, 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’s 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 Vassiliou,
Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, European Commission, in her address to the participants

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 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 centered 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;

“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
• 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 among all participants of activities. Universities should also organize prize-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 the following points must be considered:

• Stressing 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;
• **Improvement of 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;

• **Ensuring recognition of work periods abroad** and thus funded as mobility in order to better prepare students for employability and investigate additional sources of funding by establishing links with the private sector;

• **Providing clear and transparent information** about mobility opportunities and benefits of study and placement periods abroad in order to instigate students’ motivation to experience it;

• **Ensuring full recognition of earned credits is secured** in order to make the study period abroad academically meaningful;

• **Addressing language issues.**


5. **Internationalisation at universities: problems and challenges**

Internationalization at universities is an important focus for European higher education; 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 must 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 programs 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).

6. Mobility programs

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 programs are more vital in contemporary society.

• **Strong cooperation** between ESN sections, student unions and international relations offices must be a priority for participating universities;

• **Active promotion and encouraging participation** in European mobility programs through cooperation with National governments. Students must be encouraged to participate in mobility programs in countries speaking uncommon languages;

• **Fair financing system** for mobility programs, 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;
• Proficiency of participants in language of the host country, as high quality in the Erasmus program starts with a good preparation and selection process. For this, students should benefit from language preparation before their stay abroad both in their home and host universities. Furthermore, Erasmus students should receive equal treatment with local students in all academic processes;

• Commitment to the learning agreement, from professors who are obliged to sigh the agreement, must be demonstrated, in order to solve the problem concerning the recognition of courses attended abroad. 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 signatory countries. Consequently the states must take further into account the assessment given by stock-takings on the levels of implementation of the different aspects of the Bologna Process. Many European citizens, often including students at European universities, are unaware of the existence of the European Higher Education Area.

• More information must be communicated to students and staff about the results of the implementation of the Bologna process and the system itself;

• Student opinion must be taken into account by institutions through student assessments on the correspondence of ECTS with workload and learning outcomes;

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

Renato Lauro, Rector University of Rome Tor Vergata

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• **Bologna Process implementation must be improved at national levels.** For instance, institutions need 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 must value Bologna Process instruments more.** The diploma supplement requires standardization 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 training as a part of the university studies, such as optional internships;

• **Stronger and clearer commitment by states is required.** National agency should provide equal financial support for LLP Program (Erasmus) students studying in the same location. Institutions should promote the access of minorities to university level studies and include them in the decision-making processes;

• **Further improvements in the field of social dimension are necessary:** states must provide easier access to mobility programs such as the LLP Program (Erasmus), to students from non-EU countries participating in 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”

“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
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.

- Cooperation, innovation, effectiveness and motivation of the academic community is key, as the most important markers of quality in higher education are: self-development, employability, mobility, research-based teaching and adherence to international standards;
- Current trends of university rankings are damaging, 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, must 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;
- A strong commitment to public funding of higher education is urgently required 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’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
Sustainable development is the central theme in today’s society, and it is crucial that universities engage with such development while also reducing their impacts of the environment.

• **A common action plan for a sustainable and green development must be implemented** at every European university within the next two years. In order to achieve this goal, official European guidelines must be created to support this process. The latter shall consist of several recommendations and examples of how to move towards sustainability and greener universities;

• **Committees for sustainable development** must be created at all universities in order to adapt the guidelines to every individual situation. In the near future, these committees should create a European network and share their knowledge;

• **Greater investment in research for alternative technologies and better resource management** from both universities and governments is required. Such short-term investments in sustainability rapidly lead to financial benefits and the improvement of general quality of life. Furthermore, such investments are central to maintain the efficiency of our education systems.

• **Universities should be role models** in raising the student’s awareness, and therefore the population’s awareness, on environmental issues.

*We, the students of Europe, challenge our universities, governments and the European Union to transform these ideas into political practice as soon as possible.*
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
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
UNICA is a network of 43 universities from the capital cities of Europe, with a combined strength of over 150,000 staff and around 1,800,000 students. Its role is to promote academic excellence, integration and co-operation between member universities throughout Europe. It seeks also to be a driving force in the development of the Bologna process and to facilitate the integration of universities from Central and Eastern Europe into the European higher education area.

To achieve its aims UNICA articulates the views of member universities to European institutions and to national, regional and municipal governments. It provides members with information on European initiatives and programmes, and supports them in co-operative projects. It also provides a forum in which universities can reflect on the demands of strategic change in university research, education and administration.

For further information visit the website:
www.unica-network.eu
249 students
38 participating universities
from 30 capitals of Europe
10 conference forums
4 days
1 declaration