

International Conference

“Governance and Education for Sustainable Development and European Integration”

Graz, 27-29 January 2005

Background Paper

Six years after the establishment of the Graz Process and five years after the Graz Process was charged with the co-ordination of the Task Force Education and Youth by the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, it is time to reflect on the current challenges and future perspectives of education development in the region.

To further facilitate and discuss the growing impact of education reform on economic and social development in South Eastern Europe and to facilitate co-operation among key actors in education, economy, social affairs and other areas of reform, the Task Force Education and Youth is organising an international conference in Graz on January 27–29, 2005. This conference will reconsider the role of education for democratisation, stability and economic development in the region as well as for its inclusion into an Enlarged Europe.

The conference will convene decision-makers from Ministries of Education, Finance, Economy, European Integration, Labour and Social Affairs from SEE, parliamentarians from the region involved in education issues, representatives from European institutions and international organisations, Stability Pact Co-ordinators, education experts and representatives from the media to provide a wide platform for discussion on governance in education for economic development, social cohesion, innovation, culture and diversity in view of European integration.

Rather than reflecting the current status of education in South Eastern Europe the discussions will focus on the development of priorities to reach out to a wider world, involving additional stakeholders and opinion leaders and also to develop innovative ways and perspectives for enhanced regional co-operation and future European integration.

In this way the conference reflects not only the new political situation in a Europe of Twenty Five but also takes into account ongoing discussions and perspectives of the Lisbon Strategy and the growing engagement of the countries of Southeast Europe in a Wider European Area of Education.

While stabilisation and reconciliation in South Eastern Europe was at the centre of the Zagreb summit of heads of state of the EU and SEE countries in 2000, the focus since then has clearly shifted: *“The European Union reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan Countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union. The countries of the region fully share the objectives of economic and political union and look forward to joining an EU that is stronger in the pursuit of its essential objectives and more present in the world”* (Thessaloniki Summit, 2003).

The speed of achieving EU membership may differ – Romania’s and Bulgaria’s aim is to gain EU membership in 2007, Croatia only recently received Candidate status and the Stabilisation and Association Process provides the remaining countries of the Western Balkans with a midterm framework – the goal itself is shared by all SEE countries.

Education and training systems have a key role in the European Integration process. Political developments worldwide, in Europe and on regional level have led to an economic, social and cultural environment, in which education and training play an even greater role in responding to the challenges of knowledge societies and globalisation.

Thus the European Council has concluded that *“the Union must become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”*. (European Council, Lisbon, March 2000). In order to achieve this goal a fundamental transformation process in education and training is envisaged within the European Union. The Copenhagen Process, Education and Training 2010 and the Bologna Process have been developed as instruments of co-operation to support EU member states – old and new – in achieving the goals outlined in the Lisbon strategy.

Equally the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans recognises the importance of education and training in SEE: *“In this respect, the role of education, social development and culture is essential in changing mentalities, promoting tolerance, ensuring ethnic and religious coexistence and shaping modern democratic societies.”*

Education developments in South Eastern Europe vary greatly: over the last five years valuable reform efforts were undertaken by the respective education ministries and education institutions with the political, financial and know-how support of other key players of reform and substantial progress has been achieved. However, the development processes have also faced various challenges and limitations.

Above all, the role of education and training as an integral factor for economic development, social cohesion, innovation and cultural diversity is still not fully acknowledged by the political leadership and the general public, thus failing to provide a sufficient range of concrete measures and support for education development on national and European levels. On the other hand European Initiatives, such as the Bologna Process and “Education and Training 2010” have not only generated considerable interest in SEE, but have increasing influence on education systems in South Eastern Europe.

Initiatives such as the Education Reform Initiative of Southeast Europe (ERI SEE) clearly indicate the growing willingness to co-operate in this respect on both the regional and European levels. In this way ERI SEE emphasises the importance of regional ownership and leadership as targeted by the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe.

Given these changes in the overall framework the International Conference on “Governance and Education for Sustainable Development and European Integration” will offer a platform for the development of a comprehensive perspective at national, regional and European levels, which will enable education and training to target more clearly sustainable development for all by involving a wide range of stakeholders in this field.