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REPORT*

“BENEFITS AND PERSPECTIVES OF COOPERATION AT THE POSTGRADUATE LEVEL AMONG UNIVERSITIES OF THE BSEC MEMBER STATES”

Rapporteur: Mrs. Ekaterina KUZMICHEVA (Russia)

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Academic cooperation has been among the priorities of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation since its establishment. As the BSEC Charter stipulates, “the BSEC will promote the cooperation among academic communities, scholars and scientists of the Member States, with the aim to promote the principles and objectives of the BSEC within their competence”.

2. Promotion of academic, educational and scientific cooperation in the Black Sea region as a contribution to the development of the human and cultural dimension of the Black Sea Cooperation process has also been one of priorities of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.

3. The PABSEC has on several occasions discussed issues pertaining to the development of educational cooperation among the countries of the region, and more specifically, to the cooperation of the academic communities as part of the BSEC process. In *Recommendation 10/1995 on “Cooperation among the BSEC Member Countries for the Improvement of Education”* the PABSEC has for the first time proposed to consider the elaboration of bilateral and multilateral agreements on the recognition and equivalence of academic courses, diplomas, degrees and other education-related documents.

4. The Assembly’s *Recommendation 27/1998 on “Cooperation of the Academic Communities of the BSEC Member Countries and its Legal Framework”* urged the national parliaments and governments to promote the conclusion of bilateral and multilateral agreements promoting academic mobility in the Black Sea region through the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications and to accede to the UNESCO and Council of Europe conventions in this field.

5. *Recommendation 31/1998* deals with the issue of “*Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Diplomas by the BSEC Member Countries*”, a process which leads to the increased mobility of students, researchers and lecturers, paves the way for useful synergies among the academic communities of our countries, and contributes to attaining the goals set by the Black Sea Cooperation process.

6. “*Black Sea Universities Network: Contribution to the BSEC Academic Cooperation*” is the subject of *Recommendation 56/2001*, which calls upon the BSEC Member States to support the setting up of a coordinated framework for speeding up implementation of the proposals by the PABSEC and BSUN on unifying and harmonizing academic curricula, paving the way for recognition and equivalence of courses and diplomas and promote academic mobility as a source of intellectual enrichment.

7. Also, *Recommendation 97/2007 on “The Bologna Process and the reforms of higher educational systems in the BSEC countries”* examines the way BSEC Member States have adapted their legislation to the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process and the state of its implementation.

8. The “BSEC Economic Agenda towards an Enhanced BSEC Partnership” (June 2012), representing the renewed strategy on short and long-term cooperation in the BSEC region, reiterates the support of the Member States to joint university research projects and post-graduate programs. In this context, the PABSEC Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee decided to focus on the topic “Benefits and perspectives of cooperation at the postgraduate level among universities of the BSEC Member States” as the main item of the

Agenda of its 40th Meeting, to be held in Chisinau, on 26-27 March 2013. Contributions to the Report were received from the national delegations of Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as from the BSUN Secretariat. Reference material was also obtained from the official websites of the UN, the EU, the Council of Europe and other relevant international organizations.

II. COOPERATION IN EDUCATION WITHIN THE BSEC FRAMEWORK

9. Academic cooperation has been on the Agenda of the **BSEC Working Group on Cooperation in Science and Technology** since its first meeting in 1994. The latter had been the principal BSEC intergovernmental subsidiary body dealing with this issue until the creation of the **BSEC Working Group on Education** in 2005.

10. The current framework of cooperation within BSEC in the sphere of education is set by the relevant Action Plan for 2011-2012. The Education Action Plan sets among the priority activities the following:

- Strengthen the cooperation to enhance the performance of education systems by means of sharing experience of quality assurance and development of qualifications framework in higher education and for this purpose organize a meeting of experts;
- Support university research projects and/or joint post-graduate programs among universities and institutions of higher education in the BSEC region of mutual interest which will strengthen the research performance;
- Encourage institutes of higher education to promote the mobility of academic staff and students within the BSEC Member States through multilateral agreements and/or scholarships.

11. Until the end of 2013, Greece will be the country coordinator of the BSEC Working Group on Education. The new Action Plan of the Working Group will be focused on Higher Education, reflecting all Member States' view that the higher education sector is of great interest and offers prospects for cooperation.

BSEC Portal on Education

12. In the framework of the BSEC Working Group on Education and with the scientific support by the Technical University of Crete, a Portal for Higher Education is currently being developed. Its main purpose is to enhance the collection and dissemination of information in the field of higher education and specifically in regard to the legislative, regulatory and standard framework in the field of education, with particular emphasis on university research.

The Portal provides information on the educational structure of the BSEC Member States (according to the International Standard Classification of Education), a list of all Higher Education Institutes, as well as information about institutes and related fields of study. It supports all languages of BSEC's countries, provides the ability to find information according to country, field of study and more advanced queries and has a forum for discussion between members. A list of scholarships provided by each Member State, research programs and calls/information for new ones as well as job opportunities in BSEC Member States are among the envisaged features of the Portal to be developed during the next phases of this project.

Political commitment

13. In the Athens Declaration of the Ministers Responsible for Education of the BSEC Member States on Cooperation in Higher Education and University Research (Athens, 29 September 2005) the Ministers agreed, among others, to:

- Cooperate in the development of national frameworks of qualifications in order to secure compatibility of the educational systems in the BSEC region;
- Agree upon standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance and when necessary review the existing systems in the respective countries; as well as take into consideration the standards for the European Higher Education Area;
- Investigate the possibility of elaborating joint programs between Universities and Institutions of Higher Education in accordance with the laws and regulations existing in each country;
- Encourage the mobility of students, academic staff and researchers across the BSEC region, within the framework of appropriate programs;
- Promote joint research programs between the Universities and Institutions of the BSEC Member States in compliance with their priorities.

The Ministers also emphasized the need to develop cooperation in the field of post-university education in the region.

14. The Declaration of the Ministers Responsible for Science and Technology of the BSEC Member States (Sofia, 9 April 2010) expresses their commitment to:

- initiate joint actions directed toward better utilization of the existing human and material resources, research infrastructure and administrative capacities through improved access to knowledge, training activities and research programs, enhanced transnational mobility of scientists and regular exchanges of information and publications, bilateral and regional networking, fellowships and joint scientific events;
- encourage the mobility of students, academic staff and researchers across the BSEC region within the framework of appropriate programs;
- develop joint research and training programs between scientific institutions and universities of the BSEC Member States in compliance with their priorities.

International Center for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS)

15. ICBSS, the think-tank of BSEC, promotes through its activities the multilateral cooperation among the BSEC member states, the European Union and other international organizations. ICBSS elaborates and publishes research papers and studies, organizes a variety of scientific events, and manages research projects that seek to foster a comprehensive and cohesive approach towards important issues of the Black Sea region. The Research Potential of the BSEC countries (BS-ResPot) is a project that was coordinated by the ICBSS and funded by the Sixth Framework Programme of the European Commission. Its duration was 32 months (1 May 2004 -31 December 2006) and covered the twelve BSEC Member States. The aim of BS-ResPot has been to transform the political will for cooperation into concrete actions. To achieve this goal, BS-ResPot has:

- Evaluated the strengths of the research potential in every country;
- Investigated the legal and regulatory framework in each country with a view to

- promote the coordination of national policies at a regional level and with the EU;
- Assessed the current state of affairs in the field of innovation and explored more effective ways for the exploitation of research results;
- Defined the most promising fields of collaboration in research and innovation among the countries of the region and with the EU.

16. The results of this project constitute a valuable basis for the EU's future outreach RTD activities in the Black Sea region and for the next round of the EU Benchmarking exercises. Particular attention has been paid to:

- The cooperation of the National Academies of Sciences, through the provision of additional conceptual input on the activity of the Council of the Presidents of the National Academies of Sciences of the BSEC Member States;
- The identification of the innovation structures in BSEC and the investigation of the role a Black Sea Innovation Centre (BSIC) could play.

Partners of BS ResPot were: Ioanneum Research (JR), Austria, Turkish Academy of Sciences (TUBA), Turkey, Dobrov Center for Scientific and Technological Potential and Science History at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (STEPS), Ukraine.

17. Moreover, ICBSS as a BSEC related body organizes the International Black Sea Symposium, which aims at bringing together researchers and students of Black Sea politics, history and economy and train them on regional cooperation.

Black Sea Universities Network (BSUN)

18. The Black Sea Universities Network was set up in 1997 by the First Conference of University Rectors from the Black Sea countries held in Mangalia, Romania upon the initiative of the Black Sea University and the Ovidius University of Constantza. Today it counts over 100 universities from the 12 BSEC Member States. BSUN works toward promoting the systematic exchange of information and experience between member universities, contributing to the harmonization of the university management systems and supporting joint projects in the fields of interest of the member universities. BSUN HAS implemented several projects together with the member universities, such as:

19. i) ***“BSUN Joint Master Degree Study program on the Management of Renewable Energy Sources - ARGOS”***, which is being developed within the Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Program 2007-2013 by a consortium including: the Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania, the Technical University of Varna, Bulgaria; the Taurida Technical University, Ukraine; the Istanbul Technical University, Turkey; the Technical University of Moldova; and the Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development. The project is funded by the European Union (implementation period from 15.06.2011 to 14.06.2013). Its objective is to develop a joint Master's program on the Management of Renewable Resources.

20. The most important achievements of the Project consist in the following:

- Harmonization of the curricula of the program from the participating universities and aggregation of this programs in a regional approach;
- Developing of partnerships between university professors addressing the same subject areas;

- Development of a mechanism of mobility of students based on information exchange, planning, joint research projects, joint publication of results and joint theses preparation;
- Development of a platform of e-learning courses that might be used commonly by the participating universities;
- Initiation of internet-based courses with online participation of students from the partner universities;
- Facilitating and preparing the ground for mutual diploma recognition between the partner universities.

21. More precisely, the Technical University of Moldova (TUM) mentions among the achievements within the project in 2011-2012 the following:

- Elaboration by the TUM professors of 4 modules for the master degree program “Energy and Environment”;
- Participation of 20 master degree and Ph. D. students of the TUM at the International Summer School on the subject “Advanced Concepts and Perspectives in the Management of Renewable Energy Sources” in Constanta, Romania;
- Participation of 6 master degree students of the TUM in the mobility activity at the “Ovidius” University of Constanta, Romania; Taurida University of Simferopol, Ukraine and the Technical University of Varna, Bulgaria.

22. Encountered barriers:

- bureaucracy – the procedures for developing educational activities have significant bureaucratic constraints differing from country to country;
- the language for communication is still an important barrier;
- there is still a scarcity of resources for funding activities in the field of higher education and scientific research in the Black Sea region;
- lack of information between the universities from the region regarding their programs, expertise, research and learning facilities;
- there are many barriers regarding the mutual diploma recognition with cumbersome recognition procedures.

23. **ii) *Cross-border University Network for Intercultural Communication Project*** developed between University of Veliko Turnovo “St. Cyril and St. Methodius”, University of Ruse “Angel Kanchev”, “Ovidius” University of Constanta, University of Craiova and the International Elias Canetti Society. The main purpose of the project was to bring together the people, communities and economies of the Romania-Bulgaria border region to participate in the joint development of a cooperative area, using its human, natural and environmental resources and advantages in a sustainable way. The project provided for the introduction of MA program in *Intercultural Communication* in the four partner universities, equipping study rooms for intercultural teaching, training of academic staff and publishing of textbooks for the MA program in Intercultural Communication based on the cultural practices in Romania and Bulgaria. The major in Intercultural Communication has interdisciplinary character and aims at acquiring knowledge in culture, politics and economic, different types of communications as well as learning the language of the neighbour.

24. **iii) *International Summer School on PEM Fuel Cells Fundamentals*** accredited by the European Credit Transfer System, which started in Sibiu, Romania, in 2007, continued in Istanbul in 2008 and 2009, Izmir in 2011, Nevsehir in 2012 and in 2013 it will be organized in

Bursa. The Summer School is organized with a duration of one week, having a standard curriculum, which has been tested and upgraded over the years. The lectures are selected by the EC Joint Research Centre – Institute of Energy and Transport as the most valuable subject experts for each module of the Summer School. The students receive the lecture notes in advance and if they are interested to obtain ECTS credits they have to follow an examination procedure. The issuing of the certificates is done by “Ovidius” University of Constanta based on the accreditation of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ARACIS, as part of the MSc Degree Program on the Engineering of Systems with Renewable energy Sources. A limited number of grants are offered by the EC Joint Research Centre – Institute of Energy and Transport.

25. Lessons learned:

- the level of excellence of lecturers is crucial for attracting the students;
- the attractiveness of the location is an important success factor;
- a good balance between theoretical and practical activities offer better learning results;
- the accommodation conditions, logistics and organization have an important role in the satisfaction of the participants;
- the social program and interactive activities might have an important impact on the learning process.

26. Encountered barriers:

- the scarcity of the resources in the region lead to impossibility of developing this kind of activities without the funding support of the donors;
- there are difficulties in the recognition of the credits by universities that are not part of European Higher Education Area;
- the quality management and replication of the programs over the years are difficult to be kept at the same level of performance.

III. INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK AND EXPERIENCE

International Legal Instruments

27. The issue of the mutual recognition of education qualifications, periods of study, equivalence of education certificates and, in a broader context, of academic mobility, has been the subject of a number of Council of Europe and UNESCO conventions of the 50s and 70s.

28. The *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region* (ETS No. 165), an important joint initiative of the Council of Europe and UNESCO, was signed in Lisbon on 11 April 1997 in order to gradually replace the Conventions of the previous decades. It provides a comprehensive coverage of matters earlier addressed by previous Council of Europe and UNESCO conventions and aims to promote Europe-wide academic mobility. The Lisbon Convention has been signed by all BSEC Member States except Greece.

Regional initiatives

29. All BSEC Member states participate in the Bologna Process. The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for

students and scholars from other continents. The Bologna Process launched the European Higher Education Area in 2010, in which students can choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures. The three overarching objectives of the Bologna process have been from the start: introduction of the three-cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), quality assurance and recognition of qualifications and periods of study. In the Bucharest Communiqué, April 2012, the Ministers identified three key priorities - mobility, employability and quality, and emphasized the importance of higher education for Europe's capacity to deal with the economic crisis and to contribute to growth and jobs. Ministers also committed to making automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees a long-term goal of the European Higher Education Area.

30. The Bucharest Communiqué builds on the Leuven Communiqué of 2009, which established priorities for 2010-2020, among which:

- Promoting the mobility of students and academic and administrative staff;
- Introducing a credit system (ECTS) for the assessment of study performance;
- The Recognition of levels: adopting a system of easily identifiable and comparable levels.

31. The Black Sea Synergy, which provides the guidelines to promote pragmatic projects of cooperation between the states in the Black Sea region and the EU, includes a paragraph on Science and Education, with emphasis on higher education. The Synergy is thus a framework of cooperation within which joint programs between the EU and BSEC could be developed in the respective field.

European programs of cooperation and exchange

32. TEMPUS is the European Union's program that supports the modernization of higher education in the EU's surrounding area, including the Black Sea region. Tempus promotes institutional cooperation that involves the European Union and Partner Countries and focuses on the reform and modernization of higher education systems in the Partner Countries of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean region. It also aims to promote voluntary convergence of the higher education systems in the Partner Countries with EU developments in the field of higher education. Tempus provides support to consortia of institutions composed mainly of universities or university associations.

33. Priority themes under Tempus are defined around the main components of the EU's higher education modernization agenda and are therefore structured in three building blocks: Curricular Reform, Governance Reform and Higher Education and Society. Curricular reform promotes modernization of curricula in academic disciplines identified as priorities by the Partner Countries, using the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), the three-cycle system and the recognition of degrees. National and regional priorities are defined based on these themes.

34. The Tempus program is implemented in close coordination with the Erasmus Mundus program which provides scholarships to third country students allowing them to participate in top-level Master courses and Doctorate programs outside the EU.

35. Erasmus Mundus aims to enhance quality in higher education through scholarships and academic cooperation between Europe and the rest of the world. The program offers financial support for institutions and scholarships for individuals. Funding is available for:

- European joint Masters and Doctorates (including scholarships);

- Partnerships with non-European higher education institutions and scholarships for students and academics;
- Projects to promote European higher education worldwide.

36. “Action 2” of the Erasmus Mundus program provides partnerships with Third Country higher education institutions and scholarships for mobility. Partnerships in the framework of Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013 are the basis for enhancing academic cooperation and exchanges of students and academics, contributing to the socio-economic development of non-EU countries targeted by EU external cooperation policy. Consortia must include a minimum of 5 higher education institutions from at least 3 European countries and a number of higher education institutions from targeted non-European regions. Special attention is given to disadvantaged groups and populations in vulnerable situations.

37. “Action 2” activities are funded by different financial instruments available in the context of the External Relations activities of the Union (i.e. the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, the Development Cooperation and Economic Cooperation Policy Instrument, the European Development Fund and the Industrialized Countries Instrument).

38. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), is also funding the Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme 2007-2013 (Black Sea JOP), which covers regions of 8 BSEC Member States (Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine). It aims to contribute, through technical assistance, to “a stronger and sustainable economic and social development of the regions of the Black Sea Basin”. “Priority 3” of the Black Sea JOP is supporting cultural and educational networks for the establishment of a common cultural environment in the Basin. Accordingly, “Measure 3.1” consists in promoting cultural networking and educational exchange in the Black Sea Basin communities.

39. In the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, CEEPUS (Central European Exchange Program for University Studies) III Agreement includes various universities from some of BSEC Member States such as: Albania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Serbia. The Agreement is focusing mainly on Joint Doctoral Programs and covers mobility grants for students and teachers.

40. The Inter-parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States (IPACIS) adopted in 2002 two Resolutions - “On education of adults” and “On higher and post graduate professional education”- that are recommended to be used by the Member States during the process of elaboration of legislative acts concerning the organization of postgraduate education.

41. The CEI University Network (CEI UniNet) was created within the framework of the Central European Initiative (CEI) in order to enhance cooperation among universities and other institutions of higher learning in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, through the mobility of students and teaching staff at postgraduate level. Mobility is promoted through the implementation of Joint Programs such as PhD and Master's courses, financed through annual call for proposals. At the last call for proposals held in 2012, 7 postgraduate level courses, including also universities from Albania, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, were approved to be implemented in 2012 and 2013. These postgraduate courses cover the following areas of cooperation: economics, regional development and public administration, infrastructure and

logistics, environment and sustainable development; advanced biotechnology as well as intercultural and interregional cross-border cooperation.

IV. BILATERAL COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION BETWEEN BSEC MEMBER STATES

42. Cooperation in the fields of academic mobility, students exchange and the development of joint postgraduate programs is carried out between the BSEC Member States through various types of agreements.

43. For example Greece has signed Bilateral Educational Agreements with all BSEC Member States, which include the provision of scholarships for undergraduate or postgraduate studies, summer language and culture seminars as well as scientific personnel exchange through Educational Programs.

44. Co-organization of joint postgraduate or doctoral programs can be developed through Special Cooperation Protocols. According to Law.3685/2008, Greek higher education institutions can collaborate for this purpose with recognized foreign equivalent institutions following the signing and approval by both countries of a Special Cooperation Protocol which defines the scope of the program, the disciplines of doctoral theses, the funding sources, the obligations and the rights of the participants, the mobility of teachers or students, etc. In Greece, the Special Cooperation Protocol is also submitted to the Ministry of Education for a ministerial decision to be issued. In this framework, there is a cooperation of the University of Athens with the University of Belgrade for the co-supervision of doctoral theses.

45. Finally, the Greek Higher Education institutions may sign bilateral agreements through the Erasmus Program, thus promoting the mobility of teaching and non-teaching personnel, as well as student exchanges, for study, practice, teaching and training purposes. Among BSEC Member States the abovementioned apply for Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey.

46. Romanian Universities have also signed bilateral agreements with universities of other BSEC Member states aiming to facilitate the exchange of students and professors, to participate to international symposia, seminars, training courses, etc, to develop doctoral co-tutored programs and grant support to various joint education and research projects.

47. Such agreements exist for example between the Poly-technical University of Bucharest with the National Technical University of Athens, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and the University of Patras (Greece); the University of Novi Sad (Serbia); S. Lazo Poly-Technical Institute of Chisinau; Alecu Russo University of Balti; the Technical University of Moldova; the Institute for Energy of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova; and the State University of Moldova (Moldova); the Novosibirsk State Technical University (Russia); the Balikesir University and the Middle East Technical University (Turkey); the Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute – National Technical University and the Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine).

48. The West University of Timisoara has also signed bilateral agreements with numerous institutions of BSEC Member States.

49. The Consortium of the Universities of Moldova – Romania – Ukraine includes the following higher education institutions: “Alecu Russo” State University of Balti, State University of Moldova (Moldova); “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, “George

Enescu” Arts University of Iasi and “Stefan cel Mare” University of Suceava (Romania); and “Iurii Fedkovici” National University of Cernauti (Ukraine).

50. Russia signed a significant number of international instruments both in the framework of international organizations and in the bilateral framework, aimed at promoting cooperation in the field of education. An extensive normative and regulatory base is established, which ensures the export of the Russian education. Improvement of the Russian legislation is channeled towards simplification of the process of education of foreign citizens in the Russian educational institutions.

51. Over 80 universities from Russia and Bulgaria have signed cooperation agreements in the sphere of development of joint Master’s programs and the establishment of a number of joint departments within the Bulgarian universities. For example, a Master’s program for Bulgarian students in “Management in the book industry” and “Information Technology in the media industry” was implemented in 2011 (partners – The University of Library Studies and Information Technologies in Sofia and the Moscow State University of Printing Arts). At present, a program in “Renewable energy resources” is running between the University of Ruse -city of Ruse, and St. Petersburg Polytechnic University; also, in September 2012 a Master’s degree program in “Transport Energy” started in the framework of the joint efforts of the Moscow State University of Railway Engineering and the Higher School of Transport Todor Kableshkov in Sofia.

52. Furthermore, Russian universities are developing educational programs in English language in order to attract students from foreign countries. For example, nine postgraduate programs in English language were developed in 2010 in the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia.

53. Russia considers important to increase the number of government scholarships for the postgraduate training of the citizens of the BSEC Member States (including the postgraduate schools). In the academic year 2011-2012, the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia provided from the federal budget state scholarships (quotas) for post graduate students (doctoral students) as follows: Azerbaijan -15, Albania -5, Armenia - 15, Bulgaria -5, Greece -2, Georgia -20, Moldova -25, Romania -2, Serbia -5, Turkey -5, Ukraine -10.

54. In 2012 a new basic legal act in the field of education was adopted – the Federal Law 273-FZ “On Education in the Russian Federation”, which has a separate article dedicated to the education of foreign nationals (Article 78). According to this article the citizens of foreign countries arriving in Russia for education are accepted to the universities: in accordance with the international treaties; within the admission quotas as directed by the Federal Agency for Education of the Russian Federation using budget funds; in conformity with the direct agreements of the universities on the determined number of places, determined by the licenses and with the payment of tuition fees under the conditions prescribed by the admission rules. At the same time, the new Law pays special attention on the regulation of distance learning, aiming to promote and increase academic mobility.

55. Serbia has also developed cooperation with many BSEC Member States, through Cooperation Programs. Cooperation Programs define the criteria for awarding the foreign governments and foundations scholarships and are developed on the basis of the signed international agreements. The scholarships are granted for each academic year on the principle of reciprocity. Serbia exchanges scholarships with Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan (process of concluding an agreement is underway), Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania. Among these countries, exchanges at post-graduate level are carried out with the

following: Russia - scholarships for master and doctoral studies; Greece - 20-month scholarships for postgraduate studies and research work; Bulgaria – 35-month scholarship for postgraduate studies intended for academicians, researchers and high-school teachers; Romania – scholarships for master studies (1.5 -2 years) and doctoral studies (3-4 years).

56. Turkey signed several agreements on cooperation in the field of education, culture and science with Albania, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia and Ukraine.

57. In Turkey the universities provide education at international standards to their students through international exchange programmes like Erasmus and Mevlana Exchange Programs, that enable: student mobility, double major programs providing the possibility to graduate concurrently from two departments, as well as extensive possibilities for scholarship and accommodation.

58. The BSEC Member States are covered by the Turkey Scholarships Programme under the following conditions:

- Turkey Scholarships are higher education scholarships for students of foreign nationality funded by the Republic of Turkey from public resources.
- Within the scope of Turkey Scholarships, scholarships for teaching Turkish, undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, doctorate studies, specialisation and research are offered.
- Student selections take place in two phases. In the first phase, students are shortlisted based on academic criteria (at least one of evaluation criteria like high school graduation mark / score of high school completion examination / score of university entrance examination / score of international examination or diploma mark if any or general average mark as of then). Following this evaluation, shortlisted candidates are interviewed.
- Scholarships conferred to students of foreign nationality within the scope of scholarship programmes include: monthly payment, accommodation subsidies, university education fees, Turkish language education fees, general health insurance and basic transportation expenses. Scholarships are conferred to students admitted into scholarship programmes throughout the term of their academic studies including preparatory courses.

59. In Ukraine the I. I. Mechnikov National University of Odessa signed agreements on joint research, exchange of experience, joint scientific studies and scientific and cultural cooperation, with several universities from:

- Bulgaria - St. Clement Orchid University of Sofia; Dr. Peter Beron Institute of professors training and education (IPTE, Varna); St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo; Education and Qualification Center for Bulgarians Abroad at the Technical University of Gabrovo; St. Cyril and St. Methodius Center at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences of Sofia; Bishop Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen; Economic University of Varna, South-West University Neofit Rylsky of Blagoevgrad;
- Georgia - Batumi State University Shota Rustaveli, Tbilisi State University of Economic Relations, Tbilisi State University I. Javakhishvili;
- Romania - Cluj University Babesh-Bolyai, University Alexander Ioan Cuza of Yassy, University of Galati, Economic University of Bucharest;

- Russia - Belgorod State University, Perm State University, Rostov State Pedagogical University, Saint-Petersburg State University, Moscow State University of Applied Biotechnology;
- Turkey - Trabzon Black Sea Technical University, Adana Cukurova University, Izmit Kocaeli University, Istanbul State University, Istanbul Private University “Yeditepe”, Mimar Sinan University, Istanbul Fatih University, Antalya Mediterranean University.

Initiatives with regional impact

60. KEPA (Energy Policy and Development Centre) is an academic institution functioning in the framework of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. KEPA’s activities are focused on the thematic areas of Energy and Environmental Policy Issues with emphasis on Energy Geopolitics, Climate Change and Kyoto protocol mechanisms. It is an extrovert international oriented centre, working mainly with external senior experts and research scientists from Greece and abroad.

61. It has a recognized contribution in coordination of high importance initiatives undertaken by EC in S.E Europe. It is the coordinator of PROMITHEAS net, The Energy and Climate Change Policy Network consisted of participants from 16 countries coming from the Black Sea, Caspian Sea and Central Asia regions (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan).

62. KEPA has an established experience in organizing international scientific, governmental meetings, seminars and conferences. In 2007 and in 2012, KEPA organized a two-stage tele-training course. Those participants that passed successfully the exams were invited to attend the one-week seminar in Athens at KEPA premises. In both cases the training procedure was addressed to scientists (researchers, post-doc scientists, M.Sc. students etc), policy makers and market stakeholders from the BSEC countries.

63. In 2003 and in 2008, through the offered scholarships of the State Scholarships Foundation, KEPA had the opportunity to host one and two PhD candidates respectively in its premises. The main problems reported were connected to the scholars’ difficulty: i) to write, read, understand and communicate in English; ii) to adjust to the bureaucracy procedures, requirements and work for their PhD thesis in the Greek educational system.

Towards an enhanced cooperation in post-graduate education

64. Based on their experience from the above-mentioned cooperation activities, the Member States report several legal, institutional and other *barriers* and shortcomings, such as:

- the lack of a specific legal framework to facilitate the development of the entrepreneur universities by increasing the degree of university autonomy and provide efficiency to the relationship between universities/relevant public authorities and business environment (triple helix);
- certain university management flows;
- insufficient dissemination of good practices;
- poor development of the partnership between universities and business environment;
- the economic factor: in recent years the budgets of all higher education institutions have suffered massive cuts which led to cooperation restrictions. For this reason, most exchanges of students or academic personnel take place through the Erasmus Mundus program in which the costs are covered by the European Union;

- issues of residence permit: the residence permit required is often major problem. This procedure is in many cases time-consuming and complicated and as a result hinders the free mobility of both students and academic staff;
- the language barrier.

65. Academic mobility that is realized within the framework of bilateral agreements often suffers from problems such as: failure to sign educational programs in order to implement existing agreements; failure to renew the educational programs that have expired; insufficient definitions of the specific number of scientists who can participate in a certain program and of the duration of the scientific visit; failure to implement the existing programs by some countries in terms of fulfilling their obligations to cover accommodation and other expenses of the visiting scientists.

66. The numerous bilateral cooperation programs constitute an undeniable capital of the BSEC Member States and of the Organization as a whole. Such programs should be further promoted and an increasing awareness on their functioning should be encouraged.

67. The Member States' *proposals* for a more extensive and effective cooperation in post-graduate education includes the following:

- involving the Parliaments in removing barriers by introducing more flexible legislations;
- expanding the basis for the bilateral agreements on mutual recognition of equivalence of documents on education, scientific degrees and academic titles.
- granting autonomy to universities with respect to administrating their own budget, and adjusting the new regulations to the specific characteristics of the universities;
- adopting institutional measures at national level;
- establishing the priorities of the steps to take in the near future by the universities of the Black Sea Universities Network;
- identifying the ways and means of increasing attractiveness for young researches;
- exchanging ideas on strengthening cooperation across borders in the management of higher education quality;
- developing on-line platforms, organizing workshops and seminars in order to promote the use of good practices;
- boosting the cooperation between universities and business environment possibly by involving the Chambers of Commerce;
- creating a Coordinating Council/ Working Group for the coordination of the continuous postgraduate training activities of regional importance;
- establishing Strategic Research Centers, in which the academics could develop joint studies and elaborate regional policies;
- developing inter-university cooperation in elaborating programs and organizing continuous professional training of regional importance.

V. CONCLUSIONS

68. Academic mobility and the free movement of students, lecturers and researchers are of utmost importance for the BSEC Member States in order to contribute to forging stronger educational and scientific ties, promoting peace, mutual understanding and tolerance among the countries in the region.

69. Higher education institutions are key players in the successful transition to a knowledge-

based economy and society and they provide the training for future decision makers. They are the pools of expertise and centers for the development of human resources. Higher education institutions are also important factors in growth and competitiveness, and play a crucial role in the reform agenda of the BSEC Member States.

70. Strengthening cooperation in the field of higher education among the BSEC Member States will further open their education systems to each other and to the outside world, allowing young people to obtain education abroad and enriching them with international experience. This will undoubtedly contribute to enhancing the human potential of the Black Sea region and raising its competitiveness in the global labor market.

71. BSEC has an experience of more than twenty years in exchange of information and best practices among its Member States on their higher education systems, institutions, programs and diploma recognition procedures. At the same time, the Member States have been carrying out extensive reforms in the framework of the European Higher Education Area. The BSEC framework is now mature enough to build on this experience and to proceed with the institutionalization of cooperation in the field of higher education.