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**THE EIGHTEENTH PLENARY SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

REPORT

ON

**“THE BLACK SEA UNIVERSITIES NETWORK:
CONTRIBUTION TO THE BSEC ACADEMIC COOPERATION”**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. 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 been one of priorities of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.
2. Taking into consideration the importance of broad-scale cultural cooperation for the promotion of better understanding, mutual respect and tolerance among the peoples inhabiting the Black Sea region, as well as wishing to strengthen their cultural ties and develop cooperation in the fields of culture, education, science and information, the PABSEC has supported the implementation of the *Black Sea Convention on Cooperation in the Fields of Culture, Education, Science and Information*, signed in 1993. The Convention provides an essential legal framework for both bilateral and multilateral cooperation of the Black Sea countries in the fields of culture, education and science. In 1994 the Parliamentary Assembly adopted *Recommendation 3/1994 on "Ratification and Implementation of the Black Sea Convention on Cooperation in the Fields of Culture, Education, Science and Information"*, calling the Parliaments of the signatory Participating States to expedite the ratification of the Convention.
3. Aiming to develop cooperation between the PABSEC and the Black Sea University the Assembly adopted the "*Decision 4/1995 on the Framework of Cooperation between the PABSEC and the Black Sea University*" in November 1995 and has been actively supporting the activities of the BSU. One of the provisions of the Decision expressed "a special interest in the organisation of the **network of universities in the Black Sea region** - having the existing BSU as a pivotal point and a communication centre enhancing contacts, cooperation, summer courses and joint research". This proposal turned into reality in 1997.
4. 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.
5. 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.

6. *Recommendation 31/1998* deals with the very important matter – the “*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.

On this ground the PABSEC representatives took an active part in the BSUN meetings.

7. The “BSEC Economic Agenda for the Future”, representing the strategy on short and long-term cooperation in the BSEC region, underlines the role of multilateral cooperation among the academic communities, therefore the PABSEC Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee placed again on its Agenda the topic on “The Black Sea Universities Network: Contribution to the BSEC Academic Cooperation” as the main item of the 17th Meeting, to be held in Tirana on 10-11 October 2001.
8. The Rapporteur would like to thank Prof.Dr. Suha Sevuk, President of the BSUN and Dr. Eden Mamut, Director of the BSUN International Permanent Secretariat for the extensive contribution they made for the preparation of the Report. Information for the Report and Recommendation has been received also from the national delegations of Armenia, Greece, Romania and Turkey.

II. GENERAL OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN SPACE

9. The last decade of the XX century has revealed a new vision for learning and continuous education. The process of globalisation, the developments in communications and information technology engaged some crucial social issues, which affect both individual and wider social and economic movements. The "learning society" denotes a range of issues and concerns including the followings:
 - the mass higher education became already a reality and it looks that in the new century will be the norm;
 - educated workers became crucial players in economic performance;
 - more and more jobs demand high level skills and qualifications;
 - life long learning became investment in personal learning and growth that is compatible with corporate investment and growth;
 - regionalisation and the globalisation of knowledge induced the emergence of a common culture of knowledge with shared aspirations;
 - business orientation of the academic institutions has increased the nation wide and international competition in the field.

10. The importance of education and educational cooperation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is universally acknowledged as paramount. Creation of European area of higher education is a key way to promote citizens' mobility and employability.
11. In this respect it should be pointed out once again that the issue of the mutual recognition of education qualifications, periods of study, equivalence of education certificates, or in a broader context, of academic mobility, is the subject of a number of conventions of the Council of Europe and UNESCO, among which the *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region* (ETS No. 165) signed in Lisbon on 11 April 1997 is of utmost significance. It provides a comprehensive coverage of matters earlier addressed by the above mentioned Council of Europe and UNESCO conventions and aims to promote Europe-wide academic mobility. The Convention will gradually replace the equivalence conventions of the Council of Europe dating from the fifties and that of UNESCO dating from the seventies. The Lisbon Convention has already been signed by thirty-four European countries, including the following BSEC Member States: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation and Ukraine.
12. The "Bologna Declaration" worked out by the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities (CRE) in Bologna in 1999, is a pledge by 29 European countries, including some of the BSEC Member States, to reform the structures of their higher education systems in a convergent way. The Declaration clearly defines the common goal: to create a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education.

III. THE BLACK SEA UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

13. The BSUN has been set up, based on the vision of an outstanding personality of the Black Sea Region, Professor Mircea Malitza, member of the Romanian Academy. The main target of the project was to put in place a specific and well-articulated university network, developing the essential European values and providing full support to the projects, elaborated within the Black Sea family. Networking, one of the ways of international cooperation, based on sharing, solidarity and equality among partners, has emerged as a major means of action.
14. The Black Sea Universities Network was set up by the First Conference of University Rectors from the Black Sea countries held in Mangalia, Romania in September 1997, at the initiative of the Black Sea University and the "Ovidius" University of Constantza.
15. **The main bodies of the Network are: the General Assembly, the Executive Board, the International Permanent Secretariat, and the four Centres.**

16. **The General Assembly** is formed by one representative from each university with full member status. **The Executive Board** consists of 12 members, each representing a BSEC Member Country and appointed by the respective national authority, from among the Member Universities. The current **President** of the BSUN is Prof. Dr. Suha Sevuk from the Ankara Middle East Technical University. **The International Permanent Secretariat** is located at the “Ovidius” University of Constantza, Romania. Director of the IPS is Dr. Eden Mamut.

The 61 Member Universities of the Network bring a remarkable contribution to its work.

17. The four Centres are:

- i. **Centre ACADEMICON**, for the Coordination of Common Graduate programs (Middle East University, Ankara, Turkey). It is a Master Degree Programs project. It is coordinated by the President of the BSUN, Professor Suha Sevuk, Rector of Middle East Technical University of Ankara. The ACADEMICON Committee will analyse the Master Degree proposals coming from all the members of the Network and will approve a certain number of Programs to be included in common Master Degree Programs of the Network.
- ii. **Centre for Coordination of Summer Schools and Short Term Certificate Courses** (Zhitomir Institute of Engineering and Technology, Zhitomir, Ukraine). The Committee for SS & SCC will be set up and will consist of Professors and specialised trainers from all the BSEC Member Countries. The Committee will approve proposals from the SS&SCC.
- iii. **Centre for Joint Research Projects** (Azerbaijan Technical University, Baku, Azerbaijan), will coordinate the standards for joint research programs. The Black Sea Universities Network will prepare a project to be submitted at the BSEC Council of Ministers Meeting in order to obtain a budget for Joint Research Projects.
- iv. **Centre for the BSUN Publications** (Varna Free University, Varna, Bulgaria).

18. **The main goals** of the Network are:

- to develop scientific, cultural and educational cooperation and exchanges among the Universities;
- to unify and harmonise academic curricula for the equivalence of degrees and regional diploma recognition;
- to increase academic solidarity in the region through joint research projects in order to keep the “brain power” in the region;

- to develop regional modular education and training programs, using new information technologies, with the ultimate goal of creating a virtual Network University from the existing network of universities;
- to develop university-industry links in the region, by promoting and marketing the available scientific and technological capital of the Member Universities.

19. **To fulfil the above mentioned purposes** the Network works in the following directions:

- promotes a systematic exchange of information and experience among the Member Universities, as well as encourages joint projects in common fields of interest (increasing Internet access capability; introduction of modern computer-supported educational technologies; updating the processing capabilities of the BSUN to create an effective Research Excellence Network; retraining the BSUN staff according to the newest IT educational approaches);
- organises graduate and post-graduate courses, conferences, meetings, exhibitions, seminars, workshops and other events;
- promotes harmonisation, comparable conditions and compatibility of the systems of university management;
- supports and encourages scientific and educational cooperation among the universities, research institutions, NGOs and economic institutions;
- pays particular attention to facilitating multilateral cooperation projects elaborated within the framework of the Black Sea Universities Network;
- encourages cooperation and plays the role of a bridge between the Ministries of Education, Science and Technology and other institutions of the Member Countries;
- encourages twin-university relationship between the Member Universities;
- develops human contacts and cultural cooperation by organising meetings, youth and art festivals, sports competitions and other events;
- cooperates to protect the environment, as well as historical and cultural monuments;
- works in close collaboration with other related bodies of the Black Sea Cooperation process and maintains contacts with other international and regional associations.

IV. MAIN DIRECTIONS OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

20. Since 1998 the BSUN Executive Board met four times, discussing and taking decisions on the main directions of the activities of the Network. **The Executive Board Meeting in Bucharest on 11 December 1998** approved the draft Framework Program for 1999-2000 (see in Chapter V). It stressed also the importance of recognition of the higher education degrees.

21. **The Executive Board Meeting in Varna on 22-23 May 1999** agreed on documents exchanges (programs, curricula, information about the each Member University). It was agreed to ask the support of the BSEC and the PABSEC for speeding up this

process. A Committee for Mutual Diploma Recognition was established. The Board Meeting agreed that it is important to have a Fund Raising Committee, which will analyse the opportunities for attracting funds required for financing the BSUN Programs.

22. **The Executive Board Meeting in Constantza on 7-8 October 1999** decided to initiate a Promotion Program of the Black Sea Universities Network in the region. The Long Distance Education has to be one of the key elements in the future development of the Academic Programs within the Network. In this regard, a Committee for Long Distance Education should be appointed, which has to prepare a study on the current achievements and resources for long distance education in the region.
23. The Executive Board decided to approve a letter on behalf of the BSUN President and addressed to the BSEC Council of Ministers asking support in obtaining the Observer Status with the BSEC.
24. The BSUN President will prepare a letter addressed personally to each Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the BSEC Member States, presenting the following proposals:
 - Setting up of an Academic Passport recognised by the BSEC countries for academic staff and students in order to promote their mobility in the region.
 - Allocation of a budget from the BSEC for the BSUN Programs.
 - Development of an academic research program oriented towards sustainable development in the region and administrated by the BSUN.
25. **Executive Board Meeting in Rhodes, Greece, on 16-18 February 2001** was a follow up meeting of the BSUN 2000 Congress, which analysed the results and prepared future activity programs. Its major decisions are:
 - Activities for 2001 - 2002 will be structured into the Second Framework Program dedicated to university - community partnership;
 - University of Aegean will be also involved in the coordination of Academic Programs, jointly sharing the ACADEMICON Centre with the Middle East Technical University;
 - In 2002 the 4th Conference of Rectors from the Black Sea Region and the BSUN Congress will be organised in Baku, Azerbaijan having as a target the topic on: Quality Assurance in Higher Education;
 - Activities of the Network will be oriented towards a sectorial approach, so that the Network will encourage conclusion of regional conventions by universities specialised in medicine, humanities, natural sciences, engineering and arts;
 - To adopt a BSUN Students' Charter, aiming to involve the students in mobility and regional cooperation;
 - Initiation of competitions in the field of sports between students and academics will be encouraged;
 - Special emphasis will be given to the partnership between universities and industry;
 - Cooperation with European and international partners will be encouraged.

V. THE FIRST FRAMEWORK PROGRAM FOR 1999-2000

26. In order to set up systemic approach for the development of the Black Sea Universities Network, the Executive Board, at its Meeting on December 11, 1998, in Bucharest, decided to develop two or three years length framework-programs. Based on the aim and the objectives of the Network, the framework-program has to be structured on a set of priorities, and have specific targets. At the same meeting, the following components of the First Framework Program for 1999-2000 have been approved:

1. Regional sustainable development.
2. Compatibility and communications improvement within the Network.
3. Academic cooperation.

Component 1. REGIONAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

27. The results of the research that has been carried out concerning the future of the academic institutions pointed out the fact that the university should be better integrated into the community life and should play an active part in solving the major problems of the region. Although each of the BSEC Member States has its specific problems, there are, however, common regional characteristics - such as:

- insufficient resources;
- obsolete technology;
- polluted environment;
- inadequate economic structures and people's antiquated mentality.

28. Starting from the main driving forces, influencing the development process (population, natural resources and environment, agriculture, industry, pollution), the strategy of sustainable development is trying to find the most appropriate optimisation criteria for the correlation between needs and resources, targets and required means, based on the mutual compatibility in time and space. In this way, the BSUN tries to define the concept of an economic environment which is in a dynamic compatibility with the natural environment by its inputs and outputs, and at the same time is compatible with the needs and interests of present and future generations.

29. This concept relies on a detailed study of problems in the BSEC region in order to identify relations among many different factors. All these relations are also studied in connection with their impact on the environment. Sustainable development shifts the attention from high return rate development to long range development, from profit-oriented businesses to environmentally affordable businesses.

30. Projects included into this component of the Program are the following:

- i. Energy consumption and environmental protection;
- ii. The environmental impact of industrial processes;
- iii. Inter-modal transportation;

- iv. Development of partnership between the university and the business community;
- v. Environmental management of hotels and restaurants;
- vi. Regional stock and commodities exchange;
- vii. Development of the SMEs sector.

***Component 2. COMPATIBILITY AND COMMUNICATIONS
IMPROVEMENT WITHIN THE NETWORK***

31. In order to set up the communication infrastructure of the Network, each group of the member countries has a focal point and a person responsible for the contacts within the Network. Projects included into this component are the following:
 - i. A system of regular meetings of the responsible persons from focal points;
 - ii. A BSUN web-site;
 - iii. A guideline for the communication procedures.

Component 3. ACADEMIC COOPERATION

32. Promotion of the academic cooperation is the major achievement for the Member Universities. The high-priority activities are:
 - i. A multilateral agreement between the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Member Countries on mutual recognition of diplomas;
 - ii. Improving compatibility in terms of universities' curricula;
 - iii. A program of Summer Schools that should have in the end a system of recording transferable credits;
 - iv. Setting up of three Master Degree programs on:
 - Finance and Banking
 - Coastal Management
 - Tourism and services.

VI. THE FIRST BSUN INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS

33. The First International Congress of the Black Sea Universities Network, was organised in Istanbul on 5-8 July 2000. The Congress was attended by 320 representatives of higher institutions, coming from all the BSEC member countries, as well as from Bosnia-Herzegovina, FYROM and Yugoslavia.
34. The primary objective of the Congress was to make familiar and inform the Member Universities with the higher education systems, scientific research strategies and information networking potential in the Black Sea countries. The Congress also provided a good platform for the participants to meet and exchange new ideas to develop closer links among the members of the Network.
35. Three plenary sessions: on higher education systems, on scientific research strategies and on information networking were the main activities in the program of the second and third day of the Congress. The participants discussed the educational systems,

scientific research facilities and information networking potential of the Black Sea countries. In the second half of the third day of the Congress five parallel Workshops were organised in the following disciplinary areas: medial sciences; literary, social and administrative sciences; arts; pure natural sciences; architecture and engineering.

36. The main conclusions of the session:

- There are differences between the educational systems in engineering and architecture in the Member Countries. In order to overcome these problems, the participants suggested to: set up special interest groups in engineering, consisting of representatives of technical universities; to set up a database of academic programs and curricula from Member Universities.
- An effective way to start cooperation is to organise student and staff exchange programs and common summer schools or short certificate courses. In this respect, some concrete proposals were received.
- Research activities are extremely important for the future development of the Network. In this respect, the following ideas were outlined by the participants:
 - opportunities coming from local companies and regional financial donors were revealed;
 - importance of common use of research facilities was pointed out;
 - regional research projects in transportation and infrastructure were suggested;
 - research cooperation programs in coastal management, shipbuilding and marine environmental problems was proposed;
 - the Member Universities were invited to join in a project on agriculture, and mainly in agricultural machinery.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

37. The academic institutions of the region had tentative cooperation programs before, but there were no structured programs to encourage the partnership between the universities. At present big willingness for cooperation is an objective fact, but priorities are not specified and there is a huge lack of resources. There are many opportunities for cooperation among the universities, but there is no credit transfer system, no intellectual property regulation etc. In addition, very few governments have indicated programs regarding cooperation in the Black Sea region.

38. The Parliamentary Assembly contributed to the strengthening of the academic cooperation in the Black Sea region. Its *Decision 4/1995 on the Framework of Cooperation between the PABSEC and the Black Sea University* represented an important development in laying down a proper framework for academic cooperation in the region, as well as a significant support for the BSUN.

39. Although from the economic point of view most of the BSEC Member States are very similar (countries which are in transition to the market economy), there are many differences regarding the compatibility of their academic programs. Even in the same country there are many inconsistencies regarding the regulations in higher education.

40. One of the major goals of the Black Sea Universities Network is to unify and harmonise academic curricula to lead the way for the recognition and equivalence of courses and diplomas offered by the Member Universities. Promoting academic mobility, mutual recognition of higher education qualifications by the BSEC Member States will open their education systems to each other and to the outside world. This will contribute to enhancing the human potential of the Black Sea region and raising its competitiveness in tomorrow's global labour market.
41. Speaking about the academic mobility special attention should be paid to the problem of the "brain drain". For many BSEC Member States the "brain drain" is a serious problem. While it is indeed essential to maintain mobility, which is a source of intellectual enrichment, measures must also be taken to encourage nationals to return to their country of origin and to take part in its economic, social and cultural development.
42. The BSUN was very successful in organising conferences, seminars, workshops on education, research, high technologies, management, environment, medical sciences, natural sciences, engineering with the participation of prominent scientific personalities from all around the world.
43. Education in general, and higher education in particular, should be a major priority for the future development of the Black Sea region. Universities could play a major role in regional cooperation, developing successful programs with major impact and a low cost.
44. The extensive programs of the BSUN on developing scientific, cultural and educational cooperation, on unifying and harmonising academic curricula for equivalence of degrees and regional diploma recognition, on strengthening academic solidarity through joint research projects, on developing regional modular education and training programs, on promoting university-industry link etc. represent creative and substantial contribution by the universities in promoting the overall goals of the multilateral cooperation in the region.
45. Granting a proper, more articulated status to the BSUN within the BSEC would consolidate the legal basis for the actions undertaken in these specific and important fields of activity.
46. Implementation of such projects will be very much facilitated through a consistent support, provided by the BSEC, its Parliamentary Assembly, as well as by other BSEC components.

