

3rd CATANIA CONFERENCE

OPENING OF THE TECHNICAL SESSION

(R. Schmid)

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

In my capacity as Scientific Coordinator of the Catania Project, first of all, I would like to thank you for accepting our invitation to participate to this 3rd Conference.

The Catania Project was launched in 2003, during the Italian EU Presidency, with reference to the Barcelona Declaration contents and to the following launch of the TEMPUS MEDA program.

In the Barcelona Declaration, the Council of the European Union stated that: *it is our duty to develop human resources, promote understanding between cultures and bringing closer people belonging to the Euro-Mediterranean Region, and develop civil, free and prosperous societies through social, cultural and human partnerships.*

TEMPUS MEDA opens the same opportunities offered to States Members of the EU on the matter of cooperation for higher education to 12 Countries of the Mediterranean Area, recognizing that the Mediterranean regions culture and civil traditions, the dialogue between those cultures and the exchanges among them at a human, scientific and technological level are a key element to bring these people closer, to promote comprehension between them and to improve the perception they have one of the other.

Appreciating those indications, the Italian Minister for Education, University and Research, Letizia Moratti, on November 2003, convened the 1st Catania Conference, indicating as objective the launch of a process aimed at the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Space for Higher Education and Research.

During the first part of this Conference, some international Working Groups pointed out actions that could represent the steps to achieve the objective Minister Moratti had convened the Conference, more precisely:

to create a number of Euro-Mediterranean Centres for Higher Education and research, hosted in MEDA countries offering programs involving staff of both local teachers and teachers from other Mediterranean countries and European Union member states;

to develop a multilingual Distance-Learning System based on a common communication platform for the Mediterranean Area;

to facilitate mobility of students, teaching staff and researchers within the Mediterranean Area;

to set up a digital library accessible from all the countries in the Mediterranean Area.

The objective indicated by Minister Moratti was shared by all the countries representatives, who unanimously approved the actions proposed by the Working Groups, giving birth to what then became the Catania Project.

The following year activities were mainly addressed to the first two actions (Centres for higher education and distance learning), since the last two (mobility and digital library) were based on the results achieved by the first two.

During the 2nd Catania Conference, organized in January 2005 and mainly addressing technical issues, the following proposals regarding the Centres were presented:

- Mediterranean School of Advanced Studies on *e-Business Management* in Morocco at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane.
- Mediterranean School of Advanced Studies on *Media Science and Technology* in Tunisia at the University of Tunis.
- Euro-Mediterranean Laboratory on *Nanoscale Science and Technology* in Crete at Heraklion University.
- Centre of Advanced Studies and Research in the field of *Agro-Food in Arid Lands* in Egypt at the Ain Shams University.
- Centre of Advanced Studies and Research in the field of *Earthquake Engineering, mology, Seismotectonics and Disaster Management*, based in Turkey at the Middle East Technical University (METU).

The MoUs for the establishment of the above mentioned Centres were signed during the 2nd Catania Conference.

Also the proposal for the creation of a Centre on *International Cooperation and Development* in Bethlehem was discussed during the Catania Conference. The related MoU was signed some months later.

Year 2005 registered an intense activity which lead, on one hand, to the settlement of training and research activities in the 6 Countries just mentioned, on the other hand, to the broadening of the Network with the proposal of creating two new Centres, one in Jordan on *Human Rights and Human Development* to be set up in Amman at the University of Jordan, and the other one on Juridical Circulation in the Mediterranean Area in Turkey at the University of Istanbul.

The MoUs for their establishment will be signed during this Conference, with a ceremony to which Minister Moratti and the Ministers of the other two countries involved will take part.

I will be able to provide you with more details at the end of the Working Group meeting on the Centres. Further elements will be delivered on each Centre previously mentioned during the above mentioned meeting.

Concerning the second action foreseen by the 1st Catania Conference, the establishment of a distance learning platform for the Mediterranean Area, efforts were made towards the creation of an Open University as further step of the European project MedNet'U, to which universities belonging to all the countries of the Mediterranean Area already participated.

At the 2nd Catania Conference the project was presented and the features of the technological platform were explained.

During year 2005 important steps forward were taken, as Prof. Maria Amata Garito will present later on.

Prof. Maria Amata Garito has indeed been the real promoter and untiring coordinator of this part of the Catania Project.

I believe that, in just over two years, the Catania Project has given us the chance to carry out a great job aiming, first of all, at developing learning opportunities for high potential human resources; everything was built on the political vision and the support, also financial, of who proposed it and on the enthusiasm and participation of the ones who believed in the project. I take this opportunity to thank you for all this, confident that it will be possible for me to rely on your precious cooperation also for the future. We are building something that is really important, we are providing content to many declarations of political intents, which would otherwise remain a dead letter. We ought to be aware of this.

We recently had the confirmation we are working in the right direction. Last November, EU and South Mediterranean basin Leaders met in Barcelona to celebrate the 10th anniversary of 1995 Declaration. The goals of the euro-mediterranean integration process, the commitment towards a "...significant increase of efforts aimed at reaching shared educational standards within the region, developing education systems aiming specifically at the creation of highly qualified labour force ..." were reconfirmed. In perfect harmony with this indication, almost anticipating its contents, in writing the 3rd Catania Conference program we introduced a new issue: professional and vocational training. If the Ministers participating to the Conference will consider it appropriate, the above mentioned issue could become a new stream developed within the Catania Project, with the objective of creating a second network of professional and vocational training Centres.

Mrs. Maria Grazia Nardiello, Officer of our Ministry for Education, University and Research, will coordinate a specific Working Group on this issue, as explained later on.

To define "something" as a common euro-mediterranean space for training and research, activating several Centres where activities are developed in partnership is not enough. To be able to fully exploit these Centres potential and benefit of the excellence they deliver, we need to create a real network allowing them to interact through teachers, researchers and students mobility. As you may recall, the 3rd action presented during the 1st Catania Conference specifically mentioned mobility and time has now come to work on it.

Mobility, the one of students in particular, is based on a prerequisite: the creation and sharing of a system which recognises credits and titles. For its importance, we have decided to present a report on this theme after the Working Groups presentation. This task has been given to Professor Maria Sticchi Damiani, a real expert at European level.

I believe that Working Groups should propose to the present Ministers to proceed with this process.

Working Groups could also request Ministers to develop a common action towards the EU, asking for a concrete follow up to the Barcelona recommendation, dedicating special attention to the euro-mediterranean space for training and research to be built, reminding the Catania Process with the other activities launched in the region with the same spirit and objectives.

Thank you for the attention and most of all for your work.