

**Cooperation between universities and  
higher education institutions in Europe's  
border regions**

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**Summary of the results of a survey of European border  
regions carried out by the Association of European Border  
Regions (AEBR) in 2003**

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**Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)**

**Gronau, April 2004**

# Cooperation between universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe's border regions in 2003

## 1. Background

Europe is heading for the borderless future of a knowledge society. For a number of years, the countries of Europe have been in the process of converging, and what used to be merely a vision of the future has long since become a reality.

A **Europe of knowledge** is growing up side by side with the Economic and Monetary Union. At the same time, the capacity for innovation and cooperation of the continent's countries and regions and the capacity of individuals, particularly in Europe's border regions, to shape this converging process is also evolving. Consequently, the concept of **education and science without borders** is turning from a vision into a reality.

In 2000, the second seven-year phase (lasting until 2006) of the EU's **European education programme Socrates** got under way.

The programme aims, between other things, to:

- Strengthen the European dimension, bolster education at all levels and improve language skills;
- promote cooperation and mobility in all areas of education.

Of the eight actions comprising the Socrates education programme, **Erasmus** remains the one most keenly focused on higher education. The Erasmus programme "Breaking down the barriers in higher education" (running since 1987) offers support to students (mainly in the form of grants for travel and living abroad) and teachers (via exchanges, joint courses, intensive programmes and thematic networks). Currently, 31 countries are taking part in this programme.

All these programmes are actively supported by the participating countries. This is also true of **INTERREG**, a Community initiative that is helping to restructure

universities and HEIs in many of Europe's border regions, focussing on cross-border projects in particular.

In addition, the European Commission in its Communication on "The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge" (COM 2003/58), analyses the new requirements being imposed on HEIs in Europe. One of the things it notes is that, to ensure the future of Europe's HEIs, a debate is needed on:

- Adequate long-term funding for HEIs;
- the efficient use of resources;
- developing excellence through cooperation, networking and making universities more attractive at an international level.

Because of the way universities are run, these debates need to be held mainly at national and regional level.

Back in the 19th century, Alfred Nobel said: "To spread knowledge is to spread well-being". In accordance with this view, Europe's education ministers drew up the **Bologna Declaration** in 1999 and called for the creation of a **European Higher Education Area** and a more internationally competitive European system of higher education. The **Bologna process**, which has been under way ever since, has a number of specific aims. Thus, Europe's students should be able to study in any country and meet with comparable conditions of study wherever they are. These conditions should respect the diversity of cultures, languages and national education systems. Agreement needs to be reached on a set of quality standards that will be recognised by all European HEIs. In other words, we need a transparent, mutually recognised system of higher education diplomas.

Much has happened since 1999 in Europe's towns and cities and in its HEIs. The **Berlin Conference**, held on 18 and 19 September 2003, homed in further on the aims of the Bologna process and the strategies for implementing it:

- All Bologna countries are to set about introducing a **two-cycle higher education system** by 2005.

- The **doctorate** is to be incorporated into the Bologna process as the **third cycle of the system**.
- The development and enforcement of **comparable quality standards** is to be stepped up at European and national level.
- In addition, a system is to be introduced whereby a free **Diploma Supplement** is issued with every higher education diploma, giving a precise indication of the content of the studies and the qualifications they led to, so that such diplomas are truly comparable throughout Europe.
- Lifelong learning is to be made possible by offering **broader access to higher education** and by creating **flexible education pathways**.
- Over the medium and long term, the **European Higher Education Area** and the **European Research Area** are to be brought together.

The next Bologna conference will be held in Bergen (Norway) in 2005. The agreements reached in Bologna in 1999 and Berlin in 2003 are due to be implemented by all participating countries by 2010. In the meantime, there has been extensive debate throughout Europe, including in the border regions, about structural reforms in universities and HEIs. Back in 2002, AEHR, wishing to gain an overview of the cooperation taking place between universities and HEIs close to borders, carried out a survey in its border regions.

## 2. The 2003 AEHR survey

In late 2002, the Executive Committee decided to carry out a survey on "**Cooperation between universities and HEIs in Europe's border regions**" since it believed that ensuring mutual familiarity and the exchange of information and best practices between different regional and national systems represented a serious and important step towards the creation of a competitive European higher education area in the border regions. To be able to truly promote cross-border cooperation between universities and HEIs in terms of research, training, continuing training and cooperation with economic and administrative bodies in border regions, it is important to know the existing potential for cooperation and identify the respective needs with respect to cooperation.

On 13 January 2003, AEBR's Secretary-General wrote to all the border regions, saying that **cooperation between universities**, higher education establishments, etc. was becoming ever more important. There was, he said, a clear need for information regarding the forms of cooperation that exist amongst universities and HEIs in border regions, the structures of cooperation, details of cooperation schemes and aims for the future (e.g. mergers between universities, the harmonisation of courses, and so on).

Responses were received in dribs and drabs. Around 20 had been received by late March 2003. By May, another survey had been carried out, yielding a further 10 responses. The answers received were summarised. The remaining six responses reached us in summer 2003 and were duly incorporated to form a definitive overview (see the list in Annex 1).

The contents of the responses varied tremendously. Some were short, others long; not all were of the requisite quality; some contained large annexes or lacked structure and were very hard to summarise. By the end of 2003, a total of 36 cross-border regions had replied to AEBR's questions.

The responses were also very unevenly spread between the different regions of Europe. Most came from the north, but many useful contributions also came from the south.

Since then, the AEBR Secretariat has been making painstaking efforts to structure the survey results per region and according to their contents and to summarise them in table format, taking care to give a comprehensive picture of the responses (see Annex).

Geographical spread of the survey responses:

### **Cooperation between universities and HEIs in Europe's border regions in 2003**

<b>Geographical area</b>	<b>Responses received from border and cross-border regions (2003)</b>
<b>Northern Europe and Baltic:</b>	12
<b>Central and Eastern Europe:</b>	6
<b>Northwestern Europe:</b>	6
<b>Alps and Danube:</b>	6
<b>Southwestern Europe &amp; Western Mediterranean:</b>	6
<b>Southern Europe &amp; Eastern Mediterranean:</b>	0
<b>Europe</b>	36 regions

In a nutshell, the responses and reports provided by the regions yield the following important preliminary findings with regard to cross-border cooperation between HEIs and universities:

1. Most cooperation between universities and HEIs takes place in the border and cross-border regions where these institutions are located. Some universities also collaborate with other universities and HEIs in Europe and throughout the world.
2. The legal basis for cooperation between universities, HEIs and institutes generally takes the form of agreements on general and cross-border cooperation, mutual arrangements and projects. These agreements may be bilateral, trilateral or multilateral, and many are long-standing historical traditions. Others, particularly those involving new HEIs or those in Central and Eastern Europe, only date back to the 1990s. The last few years have witnessed the creation of a wide variety of European cooperation areas, HEI centres of excellence and networks of cooperation.

### 3. Cross-border university policy in research landscapes and cooperation areas

HEIs in cross-border regions differ from other HEIs in a variety of ways, due to their location and also, to a certain extent, the nature of their task. For them, interregional and cross-border cooperation went without saying, albeit to very varying degrees, even before Bologna!

The following research landscapes and cooperation areas have been set up in Europe's border regions over the past few decades:

- In the **northern Baltic** (SE/FI/NO), cooperation between Nordkalotten, Karelien, Tornedalsrådet and Kvarken.
- In the **Copenhagen/Malmö area** (Öresund Science Region), 12 universities working together in four specialist networks.
- On the **Danish-German border**, close cooperation between universities, HEIs and research institutes in Sønderjylland and Flensburg.
- In the area around the **Oder**, the Euroregion PRO EUROPA VIADRINA bringing together the universities of Potsdam, Szczecin and Poznan. Creation of the *Collegium Polonicum* and cooperation in the **Spree-Neisse-Bober area**, involving four universities and HEIs.
- A **Euregio** bringing together the universities of Twente, Münster and Osnabrück and four HEIs.
- The **Euregio Meuse-Rhine** (Aachen, Maastricht and Liège).
- The **SaarLorLux area** = European Core Area for Training and Research with a European slant (*Europa-Institut*).
- In the **Upper Rhine Region**, *Forschungslandschaft am Oberrhein* (Upper Rhine Research Landscape) bringing together seven universities and a large number of HEIs (European Confederation of Upper Rhine Universities – EUCOR).
- In the **Alps Adria area**, a principals' conference involving 50 HEIs.
- In the **Alpes Maritimes/Cuneo Imperia area** (five universities and eight institutes).
- **Euroregion Lower Danube** (MD/RO/UKR) with cooperation between 10 universities and in terms of the education system in general.

- The **Pyrenees** (long-standing cooperation between eight universities).
- **Castilla y León/Regiao Norte** = *Polo Universitario Transfronteriza*.

These **research landscapes** and **cooperation areas** pursue the following aims:

- Reaching agreement on new comprehensive and regional strategies.
- Focussing on training, the division of labour and raising performance.
- Being active in cross-border training and research.
- Cooperating with political, economical and administrative bodies with a view to promoting regions by implementing and applying academic knowledge.

#### 4. Important aspects of cooperation amongst universities and HEIs

Almost all cooperation programmes between universities and HEIs involve the following:

- The coordination of research and teaching, introduction of joint courses and qualifications.
- The reciprocal use of acquired knowledge, experience and technical personnel.
- Student and teacher exchanges, sometimes supported by grants.
- Cross-border organisation of conferences, symposia, courses and summer universities.
- The creation of joint courses and departments.
- Support for regional development and the development of new research directions to benefit the region.
- Implementation of joint academic plans and projects.
- Adult education: setting up inter-university continuing training programmes.
- Strengthening east-west/north-south cooperation.
- Improving language skills, where possible in three languages (following the Swiss model); communicating knowledge about the history and culture of the region.
- Joint cross-border public relations work.

In spite of a shortage of funds, new departments are being set up across Europe and additional joint projects are being planned, all in the service of European and cross-border cooperation. They are largely dependent on the initiative shown by universities and HEIs and are often supported by national governments and EU programmes.

Very considerable efforts have been made by universities and HEIs to improve cooperation in border regions, throughout Europe and the world. However, these efforts are insufficient to ensure the implementation of the **structural change required by the Bologna process**, including the proposals made at Berlin, by the agreed 2010 deadline.

If universities, HEIs, teachers and authorities in all areas and regions of Europe are to become European, they need to rethink and even restructure their courses, so that students can graduate with a **Bachelor's** or **Master's** degree in their subject(s) regardless of their choice of country for studying in. This is the only way of creating a European higher education area that respects and promotes diversity and regional characteristics.

The special task facing universities and HEIs in this connection is to engage in **cross-border cooperation** with their counterparts on the other side of the border(s) in question. However, what many border region universities still need – as clearly pinpointed in the reports produced by many border regions – is a **greater understanding of the need for cross-border cooperation with a view to European integration** and also the **creation and promotion of the political will to cooperate**.