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***Higher Education and Democratic Culture:  
Citizenship, Human Rights and Civic Responsibility***

# DECLARATION

Strasbourg  
**22 – 23 June 2006**  
Room 1

Directorate General IV: Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport (Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education – Higher Education and Research Division) of the Council of Europe,

## **The Responsibility of Higher Education for a Democratic Culture:** Citizenship, Human Rights and Sustainability

### Context and Challenge

Issues of democracy define the political debates of our societies and underpin their sustainable development. We, as representatives of higher education institutions and associations, students, faculty and other interested parties from various parts of the world welcome this focus on democracy in public debates, through which humane and just societies thrive and develop.

Yet, along with the global spread of democratic ideas and societies, a crisis of confidence persists. An increased emphasis on the rhetoric as opposed to the practice of democracy, low and decreasing levels of participation in politics and civic activities, a decline of trust in public authority as well as social institutions, and a decrease in student participation give rise to concern for a democratic future of our multicultural and diverse societies. As higher education leaders, we cannot remain indifferent to these challenges.

Education and schooling are decisive forces shaping the democratic development of societies. Therefore, the role of education for democratic culture is emphasized in the Action Plan adopted by the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe at their Third Summit in Warsaw in May 2005 as well as in the Declaration adopted on the Council's 50th anniversary (May 1999). The latter proclaimed the centrality of education in democratic development: "to make education for democratic citizenship based on all the rights and responsibilities of citizens, an essential component of all educational, training, cultural and youth policies and practices." That commitment was reaffirmed in the Council's 2005 Year of Citizenship Through Education.

As was recognized by 536 college and university presidents in the United States in a Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education to educate citizens, universities are strategic institutions for the democratic development of societies.

### Citizenship, Human Rights and Sustainability

Democracy can only flourish with strong supportive institutions and laws, and a pervasive democratic culture, which encompasses democratic values, ways of knowing and acting, ethical judgments, analytical competencies, and skills of engagement. It includes concern for the sustainable well being of fellow human beings as well as of the environment in which we live. It includes awareness of and concern for human rights as well as openness to the cultural diversity of human experience and willingness to give due consideration to the views of others.

The use of the Earth's resources raises issues of sustainable development and the very future of life on our planet. Even if public and political awareness of ecological issues and their importance for economic development is increasing, it is insufficient. Democratic culture interlinks with sustainable development as a conduit for economic and development concerns, and as a precondition for social cohesion and viable societies. Education is a condition *sine qua non* for sustainable development.

### The Commitment of Higher Education

As higher education leaders and policy makers we affirm our commitment to democratic principles and practice; our conviction that higher education has an essential role in furthering democratic culture; and our responsibility to educate each successive generation to renew and develop the attitudes, values and skills needed for this to become a reality. We recognize that the contribution of students as well as academic and non-academic staff to this effort is essential.

We further affirm our conviction that complex environmental, economic and societal issues can only be solved at the local, national and global levels if citizens can combine basic democratic values with a knowledge and understanding of the relationship of these challenges.

We subscribe to the responsibility of higher education to foster citizen commitment to sustainable public policies and actions that go beyond considerations of individual benefits.

We accept our responsibility to safeguard democracy, and promote a democratic culture, by supporting and advancing within higher education as well as society at large, the principles of:

- Democratic and accountable structures, processes and practice;
- Active democratic citizenship
- Human rights, mutual respect and social justice
- Environmental and societal sustainability
- Dialogue and the peaceful resolution of conflicts

### A Call for Action

We pledge to undertake efforts in our respective institutions and associations to launch a debate about this declaration, to have it endorsed by our appropriate governance bodies, and to work for programmes, policies and practices that encourage academic, administrative and technical staff, students and other interested parties to:

- become aware of their responsibilities as educated citizens, for the development of their societies, the values of democracy, human rights and social, environmental and economic sustainability; and,
- take action in their local as well as in the national and global communities to put these principles into practice.
- encourage education for democracy in the curriculum and all aspects of institutional life.
- assume responsibility for the future of their universities and colleges;

To give visibility to these shared commitments, we will seek opportunities to organize activities within our own institutions and associations as well as in and with the communities of which we are a part. We call on the Council of Europe to coordinate a web site through which institutions and associations can highlight and advance their activities throughout the year, and we suggest that our efforts be publicized on or around December 10 - the International Day of Human Rights and the day on which the Nobel Prizes are announced.

We call on all higher education leaders and policy makers who commit to democracy, citizenship, human rights and sustainability to join us in our undertaking.