

# University Cooperation in Mediterranean Countries

## **Enric Olivé Serret**

**Director of the Euromed  
Observatory for Intercultural Affairs  
and Human Rights  
Rovira i Virgili University,  
Tarragona**

Ten years on, after the Declaration of Barcelona, all analysts agree and emphasize the fact that one of the most important advances in the Process has arisen in the field of educational cooperation and, more precisely, in higher and university education. These advances have not only been visible as a result of community assistance, but have been noticeable mainly due to the important role that university institutions have taken on, thus reintroducing an old tradition. However, there is a sociological factor which should not be underestimated; the fact that a large number of the directing and leading members of universities today formed part of what we might call the nineteen-sixty eight generation, which is to say, those who grew up with the ideals of that famous “revolution” and with this socio-political conscience and who, most probably, far from the principles of that revolt, have maintained their altruist spirit and one of cooperation. At the same time, it refers to a generation of university leaders who carried out their studies just before the end of the decolonisation process and who, therefore, shared another perception of the process of liberation and that of North-South relations.

The interaction at the outset of the Barcelona Process, the presence of two generations of university leaders and a certain return to the old tradition of university solidarity, has given rise to a strengthening of the networks, first, most

certainly, between universities on an individual basis and later between university institutions.

One should recall that the Declaration of Barcelona in 1995 particularly affected “the essential nature of the development of human resources, both with regard to education and training of young people, in particular, and in the field of culture.” Later on, it was declared necessary to carry out “a long-lasting policy of educational and cultural programmes.” The strengthening, therefore, of the role of universities as the fundamental agents in a civil society, promoted exchanges and the creation of co-existing networks between universities on both shores of the Mediterranean. It should be pointed out that these networks were in existence before the different European programmes resulting from the Process of Barcelona and the introduction of the latter found an ideal breeding ground for their success. Indeed, first the Med-campus programme, in particular, and then the Tempus-Meda programme, which, while insufficient, was very effective, and opened up the way for this interuniversity cooperation to become noticeable. In the bases of the Tempus programme it is declared, following the Declaration of Barcelona, that the latter’s aim is “to contribute to the structural development of higher education, including the improvement of human resources and professional qualifications adapted to the economic reform and, in like manner, contribute to the development of structures in public administration and in matters of teaching in the target countries. The activities in the Tempus-Meda programme have coincided with the growing need of higher education establishments, as acknowledged by UNESCO, to become internationalised, which is to

say, to increase the international and cultural component in their formative activities of research and of service to the community, with the aim of increasing their academic excellence and its pertinent contribution to social and economic improvement. This is a long-standing university tradition which has made the collaboration with their counterparts in the rest of the world easier.

However, as UNESCO and OCDE have pointed out, this internationalisation and cooperation must be accompanied by the pertinent mechanisms which guarantee the quality of a higher education. It is, therefore, necessary to be very cautious at the time of taking stock of cooperation since 1995. That is to say, that although we have seen that the Declaration of Barcelona refers to the importance of universities as social agents of a high level, in practise, the European Commission has not been of much assistance, at least not before the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001. We should recall that, in the assessment made by the European Commission of the first five years of the Barcelona Process, at no time was any mention made of educational cooperation and even less so of the importance of higher education. Indeed it was not until December 2002 that notice for an examination was given by Tempus-Meda and, in all fairness, it should be said that this programme was made available to Meda countries on the insistence of the Spanish Foreign Minister at the time.

As it has been acknowledged by certain European officials in charge of the programme, the quality of the projects put forward has surpassed that of other Tempus regions, with a 60% success rate. In this manner, higher education has been consolidated in its role of agent

and has played a leading role in the preparation of the free exchange zone and in the Euro-Mediterranean Association as a whole, but particularly in the strengthening of the civil society in that area. In this framework of Euro-Mediterranean and multilateral university cooperation a constant dialogue has been made possible which has resulted in a flow of communication which, of course, has had a great impact on the perception of culture of all those concerned, above all bearing in mind the mobilization of human resources that the Tempus-Meda programme has generated.

However, one should insist that the European Commission's university "vocation" has only become evident in the last two or three years, which is to say, in the latter part of the decade from the start of the Barcelona Process. We might add, in like manner, that the Erasmus programme was initially approved by the EU with certain reluctance, only to prove finally that it was much more effective for the European structure than many other seemingly more competent European programmes and the Tempus-Meda programme has also proved its efficiency in the structuring of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

In recent times, and nearing the date of the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the Conference in Barcelona, two declarations bear out the success and perception of the Mediterranean university cooperation programmes.

The first, being the work programme to strengthen the Euro-Mediterranean association, made public by the Commission in April 2005 where, in an explicit and priority manner, it was declared, as an essential objective of this plan of work, the increase in the quality of education and the commitment by the EC to increase by 50% the financial aid devoted to education and to set up a system of networks for grants for university studies in Europe, reserving a high number of places for women from the South.

The second, was the report on the ten years of the Barcelona Process, prepared by EuroMeSCo in May 2005 where it was acknowledged that education has gained a growing visibility in the Partnership initiatives and that there is a need for the strengthening of the Tempus-Meda programme to guarantee a "mutual

understanding and knowledge between countries, and guarantee the conditions for young people to participate in public life and, especially, for women while ensuring and giving priority to a more structured educative policy." However, in the same report it is acknowledged that cooperation in the field of higher education comes up against a lack of knowledge of the educational structures and systems on the one hand and on the other, that this limits the prospects of cooperation and becomes an obstacle for the commitment by the universities as the main actors in the Partnership.

Although these difficulties do exist, it is still possible to establish university networks that, with the help of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), will make the plan for joint strategies easier, faced with the challenges of interculturality and globalisation. In this sense, the interests of southern and northern universities (particularly those of Mediterranean universities in EU countries) are coincidental and very committed to modernization and the guaranteeing of quality in the educational system. The leaders on both shores find themselves more and more immersed in similar processes. Therefore, the Process of Bologna has influenced both one side and the other, so that one can find similar processes of adaptation in all the Mediterranean Area.

From our experience of Tempus-Meda programmes, and others of EuropeAid, we would point out five key points with regard to the difficulties found in this inter-university Partnership cooperation:

- a) In general, of the lack of a culture of quality in southern universities.
- b) The danger of certain procedures being present in administration which are not clear.
- c) The difficulties of ensuring positive discrimination criteria for women.
- d) The mutual lack of knowledge of the educational systems and procedures.
- e) The problems deriving from the low level of linguistic skills among students from the South.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that these five matters existed until quite recently in our own universities. However, it is fair to point out the fac-

tors that have been clearly positive in this cooperation.

- a) The enormous interest and commitment of the southern universities in this cooperation.
- b) The expectations generated among the civil society.
- c) The real possibilities of the creation of new leading organizations.

Finally, and with reference to another European programme which is not directly bound to the Partnership nor to Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, but which will greatly affect university life in the area, the Erasmus Mundus programme, which has aroused an unusual amount of interest, more than ever before. The programme responds in fact to the community concern for the low level of interest towards our universities due to the pressure that American universities exert on universities all over the world. Therefore, this is a programme which aims to make universities in the old world more competitive on a world scale and which, consequently, aspires to educate future leaders from developing countries "European style." However, in like manner, this leadership and this capacity of appeal of European universities must also have scope in the Partnership, as a result of the necessary cooperation between universities in the Southern Mediterranean area. While it is true that the Erasmus Mundus programme is not a project of great magnitude for the time being, with less than forty Masters chosen between 2004 and 2005, in the long run, it should become an attractive referent and one of contrasted quality which will signify, of course, a point of reference for the best students from all countries and also for those from the Mediterranean developing countries (MDC).

All things considered, it should be said that the EU has only quite recently become aware of the importance of cooperation in the university sphere, but in the short term, it has established itself as the most extraordinary and most far reaching driving force for the creation of an authentic area of integration for the Euro-Mediterranean community.

**“MASTEUROMED” AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAIRO: THE FIRST MASTER’S DEGREE  
IN EURO-MEDITERRANEAN STUDIES IN THE ARAB WORLD**

“MastEuroMed” is, in many ways, a clear illustration of the cultural dialogue advocated within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Supported by the European Union’s TEMPUS programme, this Egyptian Master’s degree in Euro-Mediterranean Studies is also one of the first projects made possible through the extension of the university programme launched in Central and Eastern Europe fifteen years ago to support democratisation and the opening up of the “Other Europe” after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The adventure began in the Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences at the University of Cairo two years ago. Founded in 1960, this faculty, which at one time had Boutros Boutros Ghali as Dean, is known in Egypt for being one of the alma maters of the Egyptian elite. Its graduates make up around 60% of candidates for Egyptian diplomatic corps positions, and it also trains senior Civil Servants, Business Managers, Bankers and Journalists. It has many post-graduate courses in Economics and Political Science, as well as numerous research facilities, including a centre for European studies. During its basic four-year degree course, teaching is conducted in three languages (English, Arabic and French). It is the Faculty’s French-speaking department that has played a key role in setting up the Master’s project, particularly in applying for its participation in the TEMPUS programme.

The first aim of this Master’s degree is to teach

Egyptians and the Arab world at large about Europe. With this aim in mind, it offers, for two-semester multidisciplinary courses in addition to a course, programmes ranging from the History of Europe to EU foreign policy, the study of European institutions and the Euro. However, the most original aspect of the course is its attempt to promote a real cultural dialogue whilst teaching, at the same time, about the significance of the Arab world and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Thus, although initially intended for Arab students wishing to specialise in European affairs, the programme may also be of interest to European students wanting to specialise in Euro-Arab relations and Euro-Mediterranean issues. After the first two semesters, a seminar, specifically focussed on these themes, is organised to help the Masters students in preparing their dissertations.

First drawn up in 2002, it took one year of administrative and technical preparation— after receiving confirmation of support from TEMPUS— to set the project in motion. The course finally got under way in September 2004, following approval from the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The TEMPUS/MEDA programme has given substantial support to the launching of the course, paying the expenses for 22 visiting European lecturers, in addition to about fifteen training courses for Egyptian lecturers in Europe and almost the same number of study grants for European and Egyptian stu-

dents. It has also financed the establishment of a European Documentation Centre in Arabic, English and French. This project is supported by a consortium of prestigious European institutions: University of Political Sciences in Paris, the Universities of Amsterdam and Barcelona, and the Free University of Berlin. “MastEuroMed” has achieved its initial aim, attracting a very considerable number of students (more than a hundred) in its first year, —a proof that it has really met a need. Thus, over the next few years, it will probably also contribute to reforms taking place in Egyptian higher education (including validation of qualifications, the introduction of systems of credits and assessment, etc.). In fact, the Egyptian government has launched a crucial programme for university modernisation, known as “National Strategy for Higher Education Reform 2000-2017.” One of the main aims of this strategy is to improve the quality and recognition of Egyptian university qualifications. The idea is to ensure that Egyptian universities come close to world standards for Higher Education so that they can respond to the demands of the international market. Over the next few years, MastEuroMed will, hopefully, make its humble contribution to this ambitious project.

Jean Marcou and Wafaa El Cherbini,  
Co-ordinators of the TEMPUS/MEDA  
“MastEuroMed” Project