**SUMMARY OF THE 25th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

Prepared by

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On Thursday, March 18, 2021, as part of the 9thConference “All About People 2021: Digital Transformation in Science, Education and Arts,” the 25th ICHE took place. The host was Prof. Ass. Dr. Barbara Toplak Perovič, Secretary-General of Alma Mater Europaea and President of the Association of Independent Higher Education Institutions of Slovenia. The purpose of the meeting was to enable a discussion of experts on current issues of competitiveness in higher education. The initial discussion was organized with the aim of promoting cooperation and networking between public and private higher education spaces.

A unique characteristic of the plenary meeting on “Competitiveness in Higher Education” was its joint organization by three leading HE groups:

-the Association of Independent Higher Education Institutions of Slovenia

-ICHE: the International Conference on Higher Education, with a 40-year tradition in the field of higher education, represented by its president Dr. Ignaz Bender, former long-time Kanzler of the University of Trier

-EUPHE: the European Association of Private Higher Education Organizations, represented by its president Prof. Dr. Klaus Hekking. EUPHE is committed to pluralism, diversity, freedom of choice, and labour market related study programs.

The 2021 session marks the 25th International Conference on Higher Education - ICHE, which brings together higher education professionals from all over the world.

This year it was organized within the 9th Conference “All About People 2021: Digital Transformation in Science, Education and Arts.”

All three organizations strive for competition in higher education through innovation,

quality, efficiency, and user-oriented approaches. These organizations base their activities on the premise that higher education institutions contribute to the efficiency and relevance of European higher education and serve the needs of the people. This was an excellent starting point for the whole plenary session.

The ICHE meeting was divided into three parts. The welcome introduction was given by Prof. Dr. Ludvik Toplak, President of Alma Mater Europaea, who pointed out in particular that "Private higher education institutions are fast, responsive and flexible; we have shown that we are not lagging behind and will continue to play a key role in the digital transition." Prof. Dr. Klaus Hekking then presented his ideas on the topic of "Non-State Universities of Europe - drivers of progress in higher education." He was followed by Dr. Ignaz Bender who spoke on “Why continental European universities, apart from ETH Zurich, are not among the top 25 universities in the world.” The final lecture of the first part was given by Prof. Dr. Arif Çağlar, who introduced the listeners to ICHE and its pioneering journey over the past 40 years.

The plenary session was followed by a round table. The above-mentioned international line-up was joined by Prof. Dr. Franci Demšar, President of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, Director of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia, and former Director of the Slovenian National Research Agency, and Prof. Dr. Jernej Letnar Černič, Dean of the European Law Faculty of the New University. The participants in the virtual round table exchanged their views on what still needs to be done to make European higher education competitive with the best universities in the world. They further considered why European universities are regressing in the world university rankings. Participants in the round table also answered questions about the purpose of higher education, to what extent universities fulfill their role in education, and to what extent they are the driving force behind the development of modern society. Dr. Ignaz Bender highlighted the fact that “Among the top 25 universities in the world are 15 private universities based in North America. Five of the top 25 are public universities in the UK. Most of the world's top 500 universities are public." Prof. Dr. Klaus Hekking highlighted the finding that “European countries, compared to other leading countries, still face unfair and competitive distortions due to legal, administrative, and financial barriers. Hopes for the better are shown by changes in legislation and court verdicts."

The third and final part of the session in the field of Higher Education competitiveness was enriched by eight speakers from four different countries, their reference points mainly related to tackling the COVID 19 epidemic in the field of higher education. The speakers followed each other in a meaningful, thematically rounded order:

-Prof. Dr. Franci Demšar, Nataša Kramar, Klemen Šubic (Slovenia) with the presentation “Online Evaluation and Accreditation: What Shall We Keep After Epidemics?”

-Prof. Dr. Stane Božičnik (Slovenia) with “Digitalisation of the Labour Theory of Value – Problem or Solution for Mankind?”

-Prof. Dr. Rasto Ovin (Slovenia) with “Leading of Formal Research Group in Digital Environment”

-Dr. Maruša Hauptman Komotar (Slovenia) with the presentation “Quality Assurance of Internationalisation in Higher Education: Slovenia in the Comparative Perspective of Western Balkans Countries.”

-Ridvana Mediu and Ntovolis Kostandinos (Albania) with “Implementation of E-Learning in Medical Education as an Innovative Project for Better Results

After Pandemic Covid-19”

-Glediana Zeneli (Albania) and Arsen Benga (Kuwait) with “Albanian Students’ Perception About Online Learning in the Conditions of the Covid-19 Pandemic”

-Venisha Jenifer Dmello and Ambigai Rajendran (India) with: “Adoption of Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) in Analysing the Emergence of E-Learning at Higher Education Institutions: A Study on Learners’ Perspective”

-Adriana Dervishaj (Albania) with “Integrity, Socio-Economic and Political Transformations, Intercultural Communication and Gender Equality in Academic HE Institutions Need to Be Promoted by Proposing and Drafting a New Law/Regulation and Guidelines for Achieving Improved Quality Assurance”.

The message of these researchers was that imparting and receiving knowledge in higher education is facilitated through digitization and modern techniques, but there is a lack of personal, physical contact, especially in clinical exercises. Participants concluded that competition in higher education brings greater innovation, better supply, lower costs of services, and adaptation to the needs of users and the market.