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THE THESSALONIKI DECLARATION OF THE UNIVERSITY RECTORS FROM THE BLACK SEA REGION

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In 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the related document, the heads of UN member states have committed their countries as follows: *“Until [...] 2030, to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources. [...] also to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities.”*

According to the same document, *“By 2030, [...] the signatory states have to [...] ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”*

In a world facing dynamic, complex and fundamental changes, such a commitment constitutes a Grand Challenge for every country, including the twelve countries of the Black Sea Region, which has been under heavy environmental and financial stress for several years.

We, the Presidents, Chancellors, Rectors, and Vice Rectors of the Universities from the Black Sea Region, gathered on this day, June 19, 2018, at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in Greece, on the occasion of the 13th Ordinary Session of the Conference of Rectors from the Black Sea University Network (BSUN):

DECLARE our full support to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

EXPRESS our commitment to take all necessary action in order to:

- a) ensure a healthy, resilient, sustainable, productive, and better valued environment for future generations and
- b) promote peace, social well-being and prosperity for all the member states citizens;

RECOGNIZE the importance of the issues and the principles addressed in the Burgas Vision Paper: *A Blue Growth Initiative for Research and Innovation in the Black Sea* and express our willingness and commitment to be involved in the process of drafting the Roadmap for the development of the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) that will guide researchers, academia, funding agencies, industry and policy makers towards promoting the Blue Growth initiative in the Black Sea Region;

CONSIDER education, science and innovation as the most important tools to fully unlock the potential of the Region and to ensure a sustainable future for all. Universities bring together expertise from different disciplines in research and education and provide a unique environment for exploring and developing new ideas. They are therefore ideally placed to enable the development of robust and effective solutions to address the challenges of our Region;

BELIEVE that Universities should and can play a vital role in the implementation of the abovementioned initiatives, by putting more emphasis on skills and attitude development. The current challenges in all fields of education require the inclusion of scientific research approaches in all taught programs. With the growing availability of technology-enhanced learning, Universities may allow flexible modes of study and an efficient learning experience for many, placing the human being in the centre of their attention.

The Heads of the BSUN members feel obliged to guide and support our Institutions accordingly, in order to mobilize all internal and external resources to respond to all challenges associated with the implementation of UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

We, therefore, agree to take the following actions:

1. **Exploit** every opportunity to raise public, government, industry, foundation, and university awareness by publicly addressing the urgent need to move toward the sustainable development of our Region.
2. **Develop** a close collaboration with the Governments, BSEC and other regional organizations, institutions and initiatives in the field of education and related areas for generating synergies of common interest.
3. **Support** the Governments of the Region in the implementation of the SDGs in each country, by formal or informal cooperation activities.
4. **Explore** the potential of establishing a **Regional Chapter of SDSN** in the Black Sea Region and appoint the BSUN Presidency and Permanent Secretariat to continue this momentum and inform and support each other's efforts in carrying out this goal.

5. **Encourage** all member-universities to engage in education, research, policy formation, and information exchange on population, environment, and development to support the implementation of SDGs in our Region.
6. **Establish** joint and regional programs to produce expertise on topics such as environmental management, sustainable economic development, population, integrated management of coastal zones and related subjects to ensure that all university graduates are environmentally literate and responsible citizens.
7. **Introduce** training programs to develop the competence of university faculty to teach environmental awareness to all undergraduate, postgraduate and professional schools students.
8. **Promote** examples of environmental responsibility by establishing pilot innovation and entrepreneurship projects, dedicated to topics like resource conservation, recycling, and waste reduction with the collaboration of industry, local authorities, and other stakeholders. In this respect, the establishment of a **Regional Innovation Cluster** might be of great importance.
9. **Encourage** the involvement of government (at all levels), foundations, and industry in supporting university research, education, policy formation, and information exchange towards the implementation of SDGs. Expand work with EO4SDG Initiative, Copernicus Academy and other similar initiatives and nongovernmental organizations to contribute in finding solutions to environmental problems.
10. **Coordinate** the efforts of the BSUN member Universities, R&D institutions and other parties to establish and develop large research infrastructures, specialized in topics of regional interest and operated by joint trans-national teams.
11. **Establish** partnerships with primary and secondary schools to help develop the capability of their faculty to teach about population, environment, and sustainable development issues.
12. **Collaborate** with the European Commission, national authorities, and other interested Universities to explore the potential towards the development of a **Pilot European Universities Partnership** centered on the implementation of SDGs in the Region.

This Declaration has been signed today, June 19, 2018, in Thessaloniki, Greece, during the 13th Ordinary Session of the Conference of Rectors from the Black Sea Region hosted by Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.