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Building the Open Council of Europe Academic Networks (OCEAN)

Report¹

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

Rapporteur: Ms Marta GRANDE, Italy, Members not belonging to a Political Group

Summary

Universities and research institutes can play an important role in upholding Council of Europe values, facilitating the implementation of Council of Europe conventions and building greater unity between all member States, with positive repercussions on European democratic institutions and societies. The report discusses the work and high potential of the OCEAN project and related academic networks.

Governments and parliaments can greatly benefit from the co-operation of scholars to revise their legislation in the field of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and to ensure higher compliance with these core values. The full implementation of principles and standards enshrined in the Council of Europe convention system requires resources, strengths and talents of all sectors of civil society, including scholars, scientists, schools, students, regional and local authorities, social workers as well as non-governmental organisations. The OCEAN project will help in bringing these stakeholders together, reinforcing their co-operation and impact of their action.

The report makes recommendations that are key to the project's success, in particular the provision of adequate funding, including via voluntary contributions by member States as well as the European Union. National parliamentarians are also invited to raise awareness on this initiative among universities and research institutes, encouraging them to support the creation of national thematic academic networks, under the OCEAN umbrella, and to join them.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 15299](#), Reference 4591 of 21 June 2021.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. The globalisation of research and innovation has intensified over the last decade, particularly in terms of collaborative research, technology development and mobility of researchers.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly firmly believes that universities and research institutes have a key role to play in addressing Europe's challenges, such as upholding the primacy of the rule of law, the fight against corruption, the promotion of social rights, the end of gender-based violence, the need to address climate change, the challenges of biomedicine and the integration of migrants.
3. The full implementation of the values and standards enshrined in the Council of Europe convention system requires resources, strengths and talents of all sectors of civil society, including scholars, scientists, schools, students, regional and local authorities, social workers as well as non-governmental organisations.
4. Apathy and disenchantment with these values and the rise of populism, nationalism and new ideas of what constitutes "the people" and "the elites" create social conflicts and continue to challenge the realisation of human rights in all European societies.
5. The Assembly is convinced that the impact and visibility of the Council of Europe must first and foremost be measured on the ground. Only the wide sharing of common values by society can guarantee the effective implementation of Council of Europe standards. Researchers, students, social workers, and local authorities in various sectors can further embrace our shared values which in turn have an impact on their work and daily lives. Everyone contributes because everyone benefits from the standards developed by the Council of Europe.
6. The Assembly notes that European universities and research institutes are hitherto still a largely untapped resource for the promotion of the Council of Europe convention system. They remain the drivers of innovation and creative thinking and can be considered a universal heritage; they produce skilled human capital, including the next generation of European policy makers, facilitate policy discussions and drive change.
7. Universities have the potential of strengthening their role as human rights, democracy and rule of law incubators and of creating a fertile ground to support the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and all other Council of Europe conventions. Their capacity of mobilising the collective intelligence of civil society at all levels should be reinforced.
8. The Assembly therefore welcomes the Open Council of Europe Academic Networks (OCEAN) initiative which aims at strengthening co-operation between the Council of Europe and universities and research institutions in a mutually enriching interaction.
9. It wishes to praise the work of two existing networks which are already working on key priorities, namely the Academic Network on the European Social Charter and Social Rights (ANESC), set up in 2006 at Council of Europe level, and the Italian "Universities in network against gender violence" (UN.I.RE) network, set up in 2019 and entirely funded by the Italian Government. These can serve as a model for future thematic networks working on other Council of Europe conventions, such as the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine (ETS No. 164, Oviedo Convention) and the Conventions under the Enlarged Agreement on the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO).
10. In the light of the above, the Assembly calls on all Council of Europe member States to:
 - 10.1. recognise the role universities and research institutes have, and should be able to play, in upholding Council of Europe values and entrenching them in the social fabric, and in facilitating the implementation of Council of Europe conventions and building greater unity between all member States;
 - 10.2. raise awareness among universities and research institutes about the OCEAN initiative, via Ministries of Universities and Research, with a view to setting up national thematic networks, supported by an appropriate legal structure, or joining existing ones;
 - 10.3. provide adequate financial support to such networks and encourage universities and research institutes to make available funds that are earmarked for the professional travel of academic staff and to the contribution of their expertise and work time;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 5 December 2022.

10.4. consider making voluntary contributions to support the OCEAN initiative at European level, following the example of the Italian Government, with a view to strengthening expertise and capacity building, and contributing to the exchange of information, data, researchers, curricula and experiences at European and international level, also through international conferences, joint degrees, PhDs. or other research programmes;

10.5. in line with [Resolution 2352](#) and [Recommendation 2189 \(2020\)](#) “Threats to academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe”, pay special attention to integrate the assessment of academic freedom into the OCEAN initiative, providing a framework for regular evaluation and dialogue;

10.6. closely co-ordinate with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) members, also in the framework of its Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing in the EHEA community.

11. The Assembly also calls on the European Union to consider supporting financially the OCEAN initiative thereby sending a strong political signal, in particular with regard to the conventions which it has signed.

12. The Assembly stresses that parliamentarians may benefit from the expertise of the academia when it comes to scrutinise draft legislation against Council of Europe convention standards and oversee their governments’ action in the implementation of the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights. Therefore, the Assembly also encourages national parliaments of all Council of Europe member States to:

12.1. contribute to the efforts to recruit universities, research institutes and individual academics, who are already providing expertise to relevant parliamentary committees;

12.2. organise parliamentary hearings with the participation of representatives of the academic world and relevant Council of Europe experts to encourage the creation of national thematic academic networks, under the OCEAN umbrella.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Marta Grande, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. In 2018, Mr Michele Nicoletti, Professor of political philosophy at the University of Trento and at that time President of the Parliamentary Assembly, advanced the idea of setting up academic networks at a European level. Based on this idea, the Council of Europe launched the initiative of Open Council of Europe Academic Networks (OCEAN), which aims at strengthening co-operation between the Council of Europe with universities and research institutions in a mutually enriching interaction.

2. In December 2020, Professor Nicoletti presented a feasibility study which outlines the project's objectives and benefits for the Organisation and its member States, and discusses the environment, risk assessment, and project funding and sustainability. He introduced this project to our committee at a hearing on 21 April 2021; the motion for a resolution (Doc. 15299) of June 2021, the origin of the present report, stemmed from this hearing

3. After my appointment as rapporteur on 29 September 2021, the committee held hearings on 4 March 2022, in Paris, with the participation of Dr Chantal Cutajar from the University of Strasbourg, Member of the OCEAN Advisory Board, and on 10 May 2022 in Rome, with the participation of Ms Maria Cristina Messa, Minister of University and Research, Italy, Professor Nicoletti, Professor Marina Calloni, co-ordinator of the UN.I.RE network (Universities in network against gender violence), Italy, and Professor Giovanni Guiglia, General Coordinator of the ANESC network (Academic Network on the European Social Charter and Social Rights). The committee also had the opportunity to further exchange with Professor Nicoletti on 11 October 2022, in Strasbourg. I am grateful to all these experts for their contributions, on which my report also builds.

2. The concept: Council of Europe-academia enhanced synergy

4. Culture, education and research play a significant role in strengthening the European construction and its underpinning of pan-European values and standards. The United Nations (UN) has also created a network of universities, the UN Academic Impact (UNAI), to support and contribute to the implementation of UN goals, including the promotion and protection of human rights, access to education, sustainability and conflict resolution.³

5. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron relaunched a post-war idea of founding a European university. The European Commission rapidly launched the European Universities Initiative, dedicating a budget of €287 million to establishing nearly 40 European university networks, with the goal of enhancing “the quality, inclusion, digitalisation and attractiveness of European higher education” and of serving as a mechanism to tackle challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change.⁴

6. The Council of Europe OCEAN project is designed to be an additional tool to support the implementation of Council of Europe conventions at national and European levels. The aim is to develop exchanges in various fields of academic life, so that universities and research institutes in the 46 member States can provide input and ideas to the Organisation for the implementation, revision, further development and dissemination of its conventions.

7. As stressed by Professor Nicoletti when speaking before our committee, the relationship between, on the one hand, human rights and, on the other hand, science and education is essential for tackling the challenges of climate change, data protection and artificial intelligence, and many others.

8. European values are not only a matter of conventions, regulations and institutions, but also of culture, ideals and convictions. This is particularly true in times of crisis and must be nourished also within universities which are the cradle of education and training of future generations. Europe was not a creation of the 20th century but of the Middle Ages when scholars shared the same language and culture in a network of ancient universities. Only nationalism was able to weaken these ties, that were fortunately strengthened again after the Second World War. To implement and revise legal instruments in the field of human rights, governments needed the co-operation of scholars. The Council of Europe also needs to strengthen partnerships with young generations, who are ready to play an active role in defending our shared values.

3. www.un.org/en/academic-impact/page/about-unai.

4. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities>.

9. All universities in the 46 Council of Europe member States would be invited to join the project, with a view to setting up systematic co-operation among universities, especially through young scholars. This could improve the visibility of the Council of Europe, and its conventions could be analysed in universities, providing the Organisation with improved access to research data and academic studies.
10. Other benefits for the Organisation include: better domestic implementation of and higher compliance with the conventions; improved access to comparative multi-disciplinary research; collection of best practices; a growing pool of experts on specific conventions; academic think tanks for further development of legal instruments and practices; academic legal monitoring of trends in the development of national and international legislation; observatories of national legislation; national hubs co-ordinating national thematic networks; compilation of annual reports, databases and state-of-the-art research and the introduction of conventions into university curricula.
11. For their part, universities can organise joint courses, PhD scholarships, PhD best dissertation awards or book series, master's programmes, research project consortia, joint training programmes for academics or professionals, summer schools and offer a truly European curriculum in line with the values and standards upheld by the Council of Europe. Young scholars can devote dissertations to the Council of Europe's conventions and thus, by contributing to a growing scholarship body, assume full ownership of the principles and standards of Council of Europe conventions.
12. At the first stage, co-operation agreements will be concluded with academic partners (universities, research institutes etc.). These will determine the scope of the co-operation, the partners' tasks and logistics, the financial input, etc.
13. On 6 July 2022, an online conference on the Istanbul Convention tried to sound out the possibilities of founding OCEAN networks. On 1 September 2022, French anti-corruption specialists met under the OCEAN umbrella to discuss the possibility of founding an OCEAN anti-corruption network in France.
14. The project will initially focus on establishing networks related to three Council of Europe conventions: a) the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, Istanbul Convention); b) the Conventions under the Enlarged Agreement on the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and c) the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine: Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine (ETS No. 164, Oviedo Convention).
 - 14.1. An Italian national and European network on the Istanbul Convention as a model network has already been established and is currently under expansion. Other, similar national networks are in the process of being founded in France, Spain, Türkiye, with the prospect of establishing also a regional Eastern European network.
 - 14.2. Furthermore, a French network on the Conventions under the Enlarged Agreement on the GRECO met on 26-27 November 2022, in Strasbourg, to conclude the formal foundation of a national network under OCEAN.
15. The project will be funded through voluntary contributions from member States, the European Union, and possibly also by private actors as well as to some degree, from the ordinary budget of the Council of Europe.
16. OCEAN is currently seeking financial support, mostly via voluntary contributions, and the Italian Government has been the most supportive so far. Türkiye and the United Kingdom have also expressed interest in the project. In addition, universities and co-operating partners will be asked to use resources already available to them.
17. Recent events highlight a demand from universities, research institutes and individual academics to set up further national networks, under the project umbrella, which should be supported by our governments.
18. Another important objective is to support universities and young students from countries which are suffering aggressions and violations of human rights such as Ukraine.

3. Existing networks and OCEAN's potential for further development

19. Prior to OCEAN, the following networks have been established over the years, in the context of the work of the Council of Europe:

19.1. The Academic Network on the European Social Charter and Social Rights (ANESC) was established by the Secretariat of the European Social Charter in 2006 as a non-profit association of academics.⁵ It consists of almost 200 members from 15 countries: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, United Kingdom, Slovenia, Switzerland, Türkiye and Hungary. It is divided into 9 national sections: Belgium, France, Greece, Ireland/United Kingdom, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Türkiye. The network contributes to the promotion of social rights from a European perspective via education and training, research, legal expertise and contributions to national and international judicial procedures, mostly in an *amicus curiae* capacity.

19.2. At national level, UN.I.RE (*Università in rete contro la violenza di genere*, Universities in network against gender-based violence)⁶ is an Italian network of ten universities whose objective is to contribute to the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. This initiative stemmed from the universities' co-operation with our Assembly for the establishment of a prize for the best degree or doctoral thesis on violence against women, and was funded by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Department of Equal Opportunities. It is now open to all Italian universities, research centres and researchers interested in the topic; its activities include training, research, data collection and raising awareness of society with a view to affirming a culture of respect for gender identities. UN.I.RE is entirely funded by the Italian Government. Universities were able to offer training for students as future professionals in the fight against gender-based violence, in co-operation with local authorities, associations, health and legal professionals as well as national and international institutions.

20. The OCEAN network was officially launched as a European network on the occasion of a conference organised jointly by UN.I.RE and OCEAN in Rome on 10 May 2022, with the participation of the Italian Ministry of Universities and the Italian Ministry of Culture.

21. On the same day, Professor Calloni and Professor Guiglia spoke in great detail at our committee meeting in Rome about their experience and lessons learnt, highlighting the positive impact of the networks' activities on public policies as well as on international co-operation.

22. Professor Guiglia also pointed to a greater awareness of the national courts about social rights and an increased involvement of all domestic and international jurisdictions to promote the implementation of the European Social Charter (ETS No. 35) in all contracting States. He stressed that a greater involvement of academic networks would require a legal structure and appropriate political and financial support.

23. The impact of networks' activities on national jurisdictions and policies also highlights the need to ensure academic freedom and autonomy of higher education in Europe, which was the focus of Assembly [Resolution 2352](#) and [Recommendation 2189 \(2020\)](#).

24. The Council of Europe is very active in this area, also in the framework of the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, the project on the democratic mission of higher education and its contribution to the further development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which is mapping the *de facto* and *de jure* state of academic freedom within the EHEA.

25. In my view, this is an important aspect to consider when setting up or expanding existing academic networks under the OCEAN umbrella, in particular in those countries ranking low in the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), where the academic community is not free to engage in research, teaching, learning and communication with society without fear of reprisal.

26. The EHEA also set up a Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing in the EHEA community, following the Rome Communiqué commitment to building a more closely connected and sustainable higher education community, which fosters inclusion, communication, co-operation, and solidarity that are essential for the relevance and excellence of the future of EHEA. The OCEAN project can be a valuable contribution to these efforts and the Council of Europe should closely co-ordinate with EHEA members.

27. Additional academic networks may be established over the years to focus on key areas of interest for the Organisation, such as the protection of minority rights and children rights, the need to tackle climate change and the protection of the rule of law.

5. www.racse-anesc.org/en/.

6. <https://unire.unimib.it/en/>.

28. The Council of Europe is currently setting up a dedicated website to recruit universities, research institutes and individual academics. A book series related to Council of Europe conventions is also about to be launched. National parliaments could also contribute to this effort, in particular in the framework of relevant parliamentary committees, which may have already established contacts with the academic world.

29. According to OCEAN's feasibility study, some sectors within the Organisation also stand out in terms of the scope of academic co-operation and have the potential to be included in the future OCEAN system, as the project and networks expand and integrate more conventions.

30. The most widely used tool to disseminate in-depth knowledge about Council of Europe Conventions is Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP), providing online courses primarily targeted to non-academic practitioners, along with a multitude of publications and information documents and tools. Prompted by Assembly [Resolution 2039 \(2004\)](#) "The European Convention on Human Rights: the need to reinforce the training of legal professionals", HELP started small in 2005 and has developed into a fully-fledged programme, enhancing the capacity of judges, lawyers and prosecutors in all 46 member States and beyond. This also provides an excellent model for OCEAN's potential and future developments.

31. The committee's debate also underlined the need to pay special attention to the commercialisation of higher education. Co-operation between universities and public institutions is helpful to maintain knowledge and science as public goods. However, private actors could also be involved in a mutually enriching interaction.

4. Concluding remarks and recommendations

32. The globalisation of research and innovation has intensified over the last decade, particularly in terms of collaborative research, technology development and mobility of researchers. Universities have a key role to play in addressing Europe's challenges, such as upholding primacy of the rule of law, the fight against corruption, the need to address climate change and the integration of migrants.

33. All of these are also key areas for the Council of Europe, both at the intergovernmental level and through parliamentary diplomacy, and require the resources, strengths and talents of civil society, scholars, scientists, and students, as well as non-governmental organisations.

34. Many success stories of the Council of Europe, such as the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Eurimages, the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS), the European Pharmacopoeia, are all based on joint projects and partial agreements in which everyone contributes because everyone benefits. The focus is on the prevention of violations of the convention system, rather than punishment.

35. The full implementation of the Council of Europe's values and standards enshrined in the convention system requires the involvement of all sectors of civil society. The impact and visibility of our Organisation must be first and foremost measured on the ground. Only when these values are entrenched in the social fabric can the effective implementation of Council of Europe standards be guaranteed.

36. Citizens, non-governmental organisations, local authorities, schools and universities can make a difference in a society in which human rights and democracy prevail. Researchers, students, social workers, and local authorities in various sectors can further embrace the values of the conventions because these in turn have an impact on their work and daily lives. Everyone contributes because everyone benefits from the standards developed by the Council of Europe.

37. European universities and research institutions are hitherto still a largely untapped resource regarding the promotion of the conventions system. They remain the drivers of innovation and creative thinking and can be considered a universal heritage; they produce skilled human capital, including the next generation of European policy makers, facilitate policy discussions and drive change. They truly have the potential to become human rights, democracy and rule of law incubators and create a fertile ground to support the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and all other Council of Europe conventions.

38. In the words of Professor Nicoletti, "the Council of Europe suffers from a lack of recognition and deserves to be better known". Council of Europe conventions' capacity to mobilise the collective intelligence of civil society at all levels should be reinforced.

39. The OCEAN network is meant to bring together all academia in Europe to rethink the meaning of being European and the values upon which Europe stands, in a continent shaken by the war in Ukraine.

40. Global and European networks of universities, research institutes, and individual academics co-operating with international and European organisations, have started to flourish over the last decade. These networks can better achieve the scale and synergies needed to tackle European challenges and make Europe a continent where democracy, human rights and the rule of law prevail.
41. At Council of Europe level, the existing ANESC and UN.I.RE networks are already working on key priorities, namely the need to combat gender-based violence and strengthen social rights in Europe. Those networks can serve as a model for future thematic networks working on other Council of Europe conventions.
42. Current and future university networks would greatly benefit from the involvement of policy makers at local, regional, national and international levels, depending on the issue discussed. This would create better synergies between research and policy making and facilitate the implementation of the convention system from the bottom up.
43. Parliamentarians may benefit from the expertise of the academia in scrutinising legislation against Council of Europe convention standards and oversee their governments' action in the implementation of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.
44. Thanks to the contacts members of parliament may already have with the academic world, the relevant parliamentary committees in all 46 parliaments should also bring their contribution to the current efforts to recruit universities, research institutes and individual academics, which will be facilitated by the OCEAN project website, which is currently being set up.
45. As stressed by the representatives of existing networks, greater involvement of academic networks requires a legal structure and appropriate political and financial support. Our Assembly should call on all Council of Europe member States as well as the European Union to consider supporting the OCEAN project and send a strong political signal, in particular regarding the conventions which the EU itself has signed, such as the Istanbul Convention.
46. The Assembly should also invite Council of Europe member States to closely co-ordinate with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) members, also in the framework of its Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing in the EHEA community.
47. In line with [Resolution 2352](#) and [Recommendation 2189 \(2020\)](#) "Threats to academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe", special attention should be paid to integrate the assessment of academic freedom into the preparatory and implementation phases of OCEAN networks, providing a framework for regular evaluation and dialogue on the situation of each partner.
48. At the committee hearing in Rome, Professor Nicoletti proposed that the Council of Europe launches its own Conference on the future of Europe, such as the one recently organised by the European Union, and invited universities and research centres to consider the future of greater Europe and of the whole Organisation. In his view, students, professors and researchers can become the best allies and ambassadors of the Council of Europe.
49. For several years, the Assembly has consistently called for the organisation of a 4th Summit, which has been repeated in a number of texts adopted since the outbreak of the large-scale aggression against Ukraine, in particular [Opinion 300 \(2022\)](#) "Consequences of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine" of 15 March 2022 and [Resolution 2433 \(2022\)](#) and [Recommendation 2228 \(2022\)](#) "Consequences of the Russian Federation's continued aggression against Ukraine: role and response of the Council of Europe" of 27 April 2022.
50. In its Ministerial Conference in Torino, on 20 May 2022, the Committee of Ministers "invited the Secretary General to set up a High-level Reflection Group to consider the Council of Europe's responses to new realities and challenges and to start reporting back to its Deputies at the earliest possible opportunity and no later than the handover meeting between the Irish and Icelandic Chairmanships".⁷ The Ministers decided to review the Council of Europe's priorities in the light of the new reality and to consider the desirability of a 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, as recommended by the Assembly in a number of texts adopted since the outbreak of the large-scale aggression against Ukraine which started on 23 February 2022.

7. [United around our values – Council of Europe response to the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.](#)

51. On 24 June 2022, the Bureau of the Assembly decided to set up an *ad hoc* Committee on the 4th Summit of Council of Europe Heads of State and Government,⁸ and the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy is preparing a report on *The Reykjavik Summit of the Council of Europe: United around values in the face of extraordinary challenges*.⁹ On 7 November 2022, the Committee of Ministers formally decided to hold a 4th Summit on 16-17 May 2023 in Reykjavik, Iceland.

52. This may offer our Assembly the opportunity to call for the reaffirmation of member States' commitment to the centrality of the Council of Europe convention system, and to encourage the Council of Europe to further integrate and support independent national actors, such as research institutes and universities, under the OCEAN umbrella, with a view to facilitating the implementation of Council of Europe conventions and building greater unity between Council of Europe member States.

8. The terms of reference of the *ad hoc* Committee can be found in [AS/Bur/CB\(2022\)11](#).

9. Rapporteur Ms Fiona O'Loughlin, Ireland, ALDE. According to the motion for a recommendation entitled "*A fourth Summit for a renewed, improved and reinforced Council of Europe*", adopted by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy on 16 and 17 May 2022, "the Assembly should reiterate its call for a fourth Summit of Council of Europe Heads of State and Government, to reassert the values the Organisation stands for and to give a fresh impetus to its role as the guardian of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The fourth Summit should lead to a renewed, improved and reinforced Council of Europe, with new competences and better equipped to promote democratic security and capable of taking timely and effective collective actions to promote rules-based multilateralism and prevent emerging threats".