

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

## **CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

### Bologna Ministerial

Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28 April 2009

Keynote address

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Dear Ministers,  
Distinguished Rectors,  
Dear friends,

[Greetings]

I've had the privilege to address the two previous Bologna summits in Bergen and in London. I am happy to see that, according to the various studies that have been prepared, good progress has been made since 2007.

I would like to thank the government authorities and higher-education institutions of the Bologna countries for the hard work that has made this possible.

The good results show once more that the Bologna working method is effective: common targets are agreed and they can be implemented with the higher-education sector.

Challenges are addressed openly and solutions sought in a spirit of active cooperation. This is very close to the working method we use at the EU in our education and training policies.

We all agree on the urgent need to modernise Europe's education and training systems. Too much knowledge remains locked up in our universities and too much talent is being wasted.

Our efforts are based on the following realisations:

- our schools and universities determine to a large extent the individual and collective values held by Europeans today and tomorrow—and I say this both as Commissioner and as a father of four;
- investing in education is the best bet we can place on our future—and this is a point worth stressing in a recession;
- excellent and accessible education systems are decisive factors of economic growth and competitiveness.

### **Crisis and reforms**

My current term as Commissioner is coming to an end, and I will use this opportunity to reflect upon what we have achieved together over the past few years.

We have also prepared a brochure on “The EU contribution to the Bologna Process”, which is being handed out at this Conference.

I will touch on three main issues: quality assurance, lifelong learning and global attractiveness. But before I do, I want to share my views on higher education and research policies in the current downturn.

With Europe's and the world's economy in dire straits, some suggest cutting back spending in areas that do not bring short-term returns—such as education.

The most vulnerable sectors of society are hit hardest by the crisis and—there is no doubt—they need all the assistance we can afford. However, this support should not come at the expense of higher education and research.

In this crisis, universities have never been part of the problem, but they can be part of the solution.

The broad orientations the EU has adopted to weather the economic storm perfectly apply to research and higher education.

Our recovery plan suggests we increase, not decrease, expenditure in education, innovation and research. In fact, it's already happening; we have increased the budgets for Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus.

Short-term measures are needed to tackle the worst effects of the crisis, but we must look ahead. We must continue to pursue the structural reforms that we have introduced over the past few years, many of them under the “Bologna umbrella”.

But the pace of reforms should speed up during the recession if they are to maximise their contribution to recovery and growth.

As you know, we propose that spending on higher education should be increased by 1% up to 2% of GDP by 2020. In the present climate, to some this may seem wishful thinking, but—believe me—it is absolutely necessary.

Of course, higher education remains the responsibility of Member States and their regions, but I will not tire on encouraging political and academic leaders to tap all the support Europe can give—which is not negligible.

The European Institute of Innovation and Technology is one example. Looking back at the past five years, the EIT is one achievement I am particularly proud of.

Proposed for the first time just four years ago, the EIT is today a reality. It will carry out its mission following two main paths: it will join the corners of the knowledge triangle—education, research and innovation—and it will build an environment in which the most dynamic business people and the most dynamic academics can work side-by-side.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As I said earlier, today I would like to focus on quality assurance, lifelong learning, and global attractiveness.

## **Quality Assurance**

Quality assurance has become central for higher education over the past few years.

The Commission, Member States and university associations have jointly promoted a culture of quality for a long time.

The main idea behind what is called ‘internal quality assurance’ is to help institutions help themselves through peer reviews and benchmarking.

More recently, we have seen the rise of *external* quality assurance. Ten years ago, only a few countries in Europe had external reviews of university teaching. Again, pilot projects

supported by the European Commission have helped to promote external quality assurance persuade in all EU countries.

As a result, we now have bodies such as ENQA and quality–assurance agencies in most of the 46 countries that participate in the Bologna process.

Finally, a year ago I had the pleasure of speaking at the founding event of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education.

The Register is the result of a successful cooperation between the Bologna process and the EU and its operations shows that it is applying quite rigorous selection quality criteria.

## **Lifelong learning**

As to lifelong learning—that old chestnut you may say—we’ve been talking about it for years, at least since the European Year for Lifelong Learning in 1996.

A lot of work has gone into improving the recognition of prior learning and introducing more flexible, student–centred learning modes.

Yet, in spite of all these efforts—including the Charter the EUA presented last year—lifelong learning remains a weak point in the modernisation agenda.

The rationale for lifelong learning is stronger than ever. More and more people find themselves between jobs either because they want to change career paths or because they have been laid off and need to retrain to stay competitive in the labour market.

Let me stress this point in the clearest terms: learning at any stage in life will have to become the norm.

The next question is on the content of learning. What kind of knowledge and which skills will Europeans need in the future? Nobody knows for sure, and particularly in higher education accurate forecasting is impossible.

However, much intelligence on jobs forecasting exists at both national and EU level which can help us see broad trends and emerging gaps.

Last December we issued a Communication on “New skills for new jobs”. Our policy document set out our stall and proposed new cooperation stressing, among other things, the importance of a scientific approach and evidence–based policy.

Higher education should be more relevant to the needs of the labour market and it should be more accessible. We would like to raise the aspirations of all those fellow Europeans who think that universities are not for them.

Demographic changes indicate huge decreases in the stock of school leavers; the proportion of mature students in the student body will grow. More people are likely to enrol at university later in life, not necessarily when they turn 18.

The universities that open their doors to these new students will thrive. I have proposed that, over the next ten years, lifelong learning and mobility are key priorities in an updated strategic framework for cooperation in education and training.

## **Global attractiveness**

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I will now turn to the third issue; how can we make our universities more attractive? Higher education institutions operate in a global context, and I think that international co-operation and competition can bring many benefits and opportunities

The Bologna process is the main instrument we have in Europe to manage the growing internationalisation of the higher-education sector and there are signs that it is working well. As you know, several countries in other parts of the world are bringing their systems in line with the Bologna framework.

I have strongly advocated a formal acknowledgment of these efforts by granting some kind of Bologna partnership status. Although enough support in the Bologna follow-up group could not be found, I welcome the decision to hold a Bologna Policy Forum tomorrow. It is a step in the right direction.

I am sure that this will open a fruitful window for dialogue with countries outside Europe and I congratulate the governments of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg on this initiative.

The Commission attaches great importance to cooperating with other parts of the world. We have been working with EU neighbouring countries through the Tempus programme, which involves 55 countries, many of which are also part of the Bologna Process.

We have also signed bilateral co-operation agreements with other countries, and there is Erasmus Mundus—our flagship programme for global cooperation—which has now been extended to the doctoral level.

In this context, I am pleased to inform you that we are working on a Green Paper devoted to learning mobility of young people in all sectors of education and training in response to the conclusions of the Education Council in November.

I believe that all students deserve mobility opportunities but fewer than 10% actually participate in mobility schemes.

We are launching the public consultation in July. I am looking forward to receiving feedback from ministers in charge of education and training and from all stakeholders.

## **Ranking**

Transparency is another key factor if we are serious about making our universities more attractive. The Commission is supporting transparency in several ways, such as the classification of higher-education institutions and various ranking initiatives.

Ranking projects are always controversial, including—I understand—among some Bologna countries. This is not surprising, because ranking is difficult to do and has the potential to affect and even distort life in academia.

However, rankings are already a fact of life and cannot be wished away. Also, we cannot deny their popularity and their increasing visibility.

Existing ranking systems are too narrow. They are mostly based on research performance to the exclusion of areas such as teaching and community outreach—thereby failing to account for the rich diversity of higher education. However, they are devoured by the media, thereby generating perceptions in the public opinion that do not always correspond to reality.

How can we respond? Working towards our own system is the smart thing to do. We need a system that captures all the specificities of European universities and serves our own constituents.

A good European system would be of great help for students as they select the university that best matches their talent and inclination. This is why, in December 2008, we launched a call for tender for the design and testing of a new ranking system and look forward to having the results of the feasibility study in mid-2011.

We are convinced that an independent and authoritative mapping of universities and their programmes—in Europe and beyond—will make education systems more transparent and more effective. Above all, it would make the life of many Europeans easier—and that's what counts.

## **Close**

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to close with a few interesting facts found by a new Eurobarometer survey carried out on 15,000 students across 30 European countries.

Let us see what respondents have to say about the objectives of higher education:

97% say that higher education should provide knowledge and skills relevant to the labour market;

91% agree on the importance of enhancing personal development and 87% of helping young people play an active role in society; as to transparency

83% think that independent rankings on the quality of universities and programmes would help them decide where to study.

The survey also asked about tuition fees. Two thirds think that higher education should be free of charge, whereas the rest would accept fees, provided grants and loans are available.

When asked about mobility, 40% of respondents say they have never planned to study abroad and 11% that they have planned to do so but gave up. One third of the students say they intend to study in another country.

The main obstacle to studying abroad is lack of funds, mentioned by 61% of those who have abandoned plans to study abroad or who had never thought of doing so.

I think these figures give us enough food for thought and will stimulate our debate. I wish us all a very successful conference.

Thank you.