

SPEECH BY SJUR BERGAN, COUNCIL OF EUROPE, TO THE MEETING OF MINISTERS OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Bergen, 19 – 20 May 2005

Chair, Ministers, Commissioner, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me, on behalf of Secretary General Terry Davis, to reiterate the Council of Europe's strong and continuing support for the European Higher Education Area. This has just been confirmed by the action plan adopted by our third summit of Heads of State and Government, held in Warsaw earlier this week. This effort is very much within the logic of our work as a pan-European organization working for democracy, human rights, the rule of law and social cohesion – in other words, for a Europe of values.

I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the good cooperation we have developed with the representatives of the European Commission, UNESCO, the EUA, ESIB and EURASHE in the Bologna Follow Up Group

Today, I would like to focus on five factors that will, in the Council of Europe's view, to a large extent decide whether the European Higher Education Area will be a success.

Firstly, it must be a truly European area. This has been achieved with the admission today of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, along with the admission of seven countries two years ago in Berlin. We hope that one day political conditions in Belarus will make it possible also for the academic community of that country to take its rightful place in the Bologna Process. The challenge is now to make all countries equal partners, and the Council of Europe will continue to play a key role in this respect.

Secondly, the European Higher Education Area must be open toward the rest of the world. There are very real problems with the perception of "Bologna" in other parts of the world, and we must address them now to reach our goal of being attractive.

Thirdly, the European Higher Education Area must be an area of substance, and the stocktaking report shows that we are well on our way. The Bologna Process must build the bridge that enables learners to cross the divide between different education systems without leaving the real value of their luggage behind at the customs station. It must also make the divide between systems smaller, and it must encompass all learners, including the 2 million in short cycle higher education.

Fourthly, the European Higher Education Area must be one of social cohesion. A European Higher Education Area cannot aim at less than equal opportunities for all its members. It cannot aim at less than enabling all individuals to fully develop their abilities

and their potential. It cannot afford to do less than give all Europeans the opportunity to put their abilities, skills and knowledge at the service of others.

Fifth, we must have the courage to make difficult decisions. Public responsibility must remain a key feature of the European Higher Education Area, and this will require a hard look at how the public responsibility can be exercised in modern, complex societies. In other words, we must follow up the debate launched by the Council of Europe in 2004 and manifested in the very recent publication you have before you.

We must also have the courage and the political will to address issues where other parts of public policies interact with higher education policies. Mobility of students, staff and graduates throughout Europe cannot be achieved if we do not have the courage to address the difficult issues of visas, work permits and the portability of social security rights. We cannot complete the European Higher Education Area if we do not rise to this challenge.

The ultimate measure of the success of the European Higher Education Area will be that it enables students, staff and graduates to move freely throughout Europe, that it engages constructively with the rest of the world and that its policies enable higher education and research to fulfill its major purposes:

- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic society;
- preparation for sustainable employment;
- personal development;
- the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a Norwegian saying to the effect that after sun, there will be rain. Let us disprove this. Let us make sure that after Bergen, there will always be sun in European higher education – even midnight sun.