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Opening Address

Towards the European Higher Education Area

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Minister Kristin Clemet,
Minister François Biltgen,
Colleagues and Friends,

Introduction

It is a great pleasure for me to address today the Ministers responsible for higher education from 45 European countries. The rapid increase in Bologna Signatory States is one of the signs of how dynamic the process really is.

The Bologna process has brought about more change in higher education than any other international instrument or policy has done before. And it has done so on a voluntary basis, as is also the case with EU education policy.

I think we would all agree that the Ministers were right, when they signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999, to recognise the urgency of reform. There was, and there certainly still is, a need to modernise higher education systems in order to face the challenges of globalisation and address the expectations of our citizens.

The same sense of urgency was felt by EU Heads of State and Government when they met in Lisbon in 2000, to launch the Lisbon

Strategy, aimed at making Europe a top level knowledge society and economy.

In this regard, I will say a few words on the challenges and expectations we face and how we could address them, linking the Bologna Process to the wider Lisbon agenda. And I will give you my view on the important decisions you are going to take here in Bergen.

Challenges

First of all, the challenges faced by the higher education systems in Europe: our systems, our universities face bigger challenges and stronger competition than ever before. A quick look at the figures tells us that the situation is serious. I am going to quote some figures for the 25 countries of the EU; but they are representative, at best, for all 45 of us.

Tertiary education attainment

While Europe is certainly a highly educated society, only 21% of the EU working-age population has achieved tertiary education, significantly lower than in the US (38%), Canada (43%) or Japan (36%), as well as South Korea (26%).

Access to higher education

While most of Europe sees higher education as a “public good”, tertiary enrolments have been stronger and grown faster in other parts of the world. In the EU, about 52% of the relevant age group is enrolled in higher education. The EU is slightly ahead of Japan (49%)

but lags behind Canada (59%) and far behind the US (81%) and South Korea (82%).

Research performance

While the EU educates more graduates in science and technology and produces more PhDs overall, nothing like as many of these go into research as they do in the US or Japan. We have about 5.5 researchers per 1,000 employees, marginally less than Canada or South Korea, but way below the US (at 9.0) or Japan (at 9.7).

Two recent surveys emphasising research found that there are only a handful of European universities in the top 50 in the world. The rapid growth of Asian universities, both public and private, is now also challenging Europe – and the US – in terms of doctoral candidates in science and engineering.

In order to change this situation, we need profound reforms. Let us turn to the Bologna and Lisbon reform agendas and see what they contribute. I will start with the Bologna reforms.

Bologna Reforms – Decisive steps in Bergen

Today and tomorrow, we are going to take decisions which will be decisive for the architecture of the European Higher Education Area. They concern Quality Assurance and the European Qualifications Framework.

Quality assurance

As regards quality assurance, we have before us European Standards both for Universities and for Quality Assurance Agencies. We must also state our view on the idea of a European Register.

With due respect for diversity, I believe that we need a minimum level of compatibility in the form of common references and agreed standards. This is essential to achieve the cross-recognition of qualifications and competencies, expected by our citizens and the European labour market. These decisions on quality assurance will help to achieve that objective. They will also lay the foundation for the adoption of the EU Recommendation on further cooperation in quality assurance, as proposed by the Commission last year.

Quality assurance and accreditation exercises usually take place at national or regional level. In certain highly international fields of studies, however, transnational evaluations and accreditations can be meaningful. For this reason, the Commission is supporting sector-led projects to establish European Quality Labels in Engineering and Chemistry, and I would expect a few more comparable fields of study to follow these two examples.

European Qualifications Framework

We also have before us a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for Higher Education, and we will commit to establishing “National Qualifications Frameworks”. These decisions link in with the Commission plans for a “European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong learning”, about which I recently wrote to you.

I have high expectations of the European Qualifications Framework. It will provide commonly understood reference levels on how to describe learning, from basic skills up to the doctorate, with an ECTS-like credit range attached to each level. But we are also seeing changes in how the results of learning are expressed.

In a few years from now, students, institutions, parents and employers in the wider Europe will be talking in terms of learning outcomes—what a graduate can actually do, at the end of his or her degree—and competences. This will certainly facilitate mobility and recognition across a wide variety of learning systems, as well as make our degrees more comprehensible for employers.

The EQF will help institutions and learners find their way but it will not prevent universities and individuals making their own original contribution to the creation and gathering of knowledge.

In June, the Commission will start a broad consultation on this future scenario for a European Qualifications Framework, with Credits for Lifelong Learning. I will keep you informed about it, and look forward to having your contributions. Let me stress that the consultation is completely open, and I hope that all Ministers here today will to contribute to it.

Doctoral level

Talking about the doctoral level, may I remind you that there is a European Charter for Researchers and a Code of conduct for the recruitment of researchers. The EU Member States accepted these in April, and they both help to provide a more helpful framework for

developing research. Similarly, I have agreed with my Colleague Commissioner Janez Potočnik, I will examine how to re-launch the idea of a European Doctorate Label. The label would be awarded to doctoral programmes with a clear European Dimension. It would raise the profile of these joint endeavours at the crossroads of education and research.

Universities and the Lisbon Strategy

As you know, the EU Heads of State and Government re-launched the Lisbon Strategy in March this year and they have confirmed the central role of knowledge for growth and employment.

Last April, the Commission adopted a Communication “Mobilising the brainpower of Europe”. I have already sent you a copy. It describes the Commission’s view on what is needed to enable universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy.

Bologna reforms are necessary and they will have my full support in the years to come, but we must look beyond the structures, and deal with the underlying questions of attractiveness, governance and funding. In other words: What do we need to achieve world-class quality, how can we improve governance of institutions and systems, and how can we increase and diversify higher education funding?

I call for a new kind of partnership between the State and the University, with the following elements:

- We need to balance autonomy, responsibility and self-governance on the one side with strategic guidance from governments;

- We need a stable and medium-term funding framework (which should incorporate a creative mix of public and private funding); and
- We need real accountability towards society.

At the same time, we must ensure equitable access for all qualified students; and this, independently of the funding mix chosen. Sufficient investment in, and sound management of higher education are core determinants of the future of each region and country in Europe and of the future of Europe in the world.

Our decisions here in Bergen will provide the basis for this future and I look forward to our discussions.

Thank you.