

Androulla Vassiliou – Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth
Commissioner

Opening speech

The Bologna Ministerial Anniversary Conference
Budapest/Vienna – 11-12 March 2010

Speech

Dear Ministers,

Distinguished Rectors,

I am honoured to open this landmark conference on behalf of the European Commission.

It seems to me that we are turning a page in European cooperation in higher education. Ten years after the birth of the Bologna process, we are now ready to launch the European Higher Education Area.

National governments, education authorities, the European Commission and the many stakeholders who have made Bologna happen should be proud of its remarkable achievements.

What was Europe's higher education like ten years ago?

- There were structural challenges: study duration was uneven, mobility was difficult, and drop-out rates unacceptably high.

- In addition, too few universities regarded the employability of their graduates as part of their concern.
- Finally, Europe's universities were generally not very attractive to students, teachers and scholars from other world regions.

Please don't get me wrong, Europe was – and still is – one of the best places in the world to study and do research, but there was a broad consensus that these issues must be addressed.

There was a consensus on the need to modernise our systems of higher education and this is why 29 countries agreed on a common set of reforms back in 1999.

Today's higher education landscape has changed dramatically; the former patchwork of national structures has grown into a genuine European Higher Education Area.

Incidentally, this is the story told by your conference logo: all the pieces are starting to fit together in a whole that is stronger than the sum of its parts.

The Bologna process is far from perfect and there is still a lot of work to do. But the progress is undeniable. The 17 countries that have joined the process since its launch are proof enough of that, as is the interest it generates around the globe.

As you know well, the Commission has supported the process since the start and I can assure you that it will continue to do so in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to indicate three promising areas of development for the Bologna process: mobility, quality assurance, and global attractiveness. Let me briefly review them.

Mobility

Increasing the mobility of students and staff is one of the key objectives of Bologna.

We estimate that about 10% of university graduates today have been mobile during their studies within Erasmus, other programmes, or as free movers.

I said this was an estimate because there are no reliable data on free movers.

One in ten is not bad, but certainly not enough considering the benefits that learning mobility brings to individuals, institutions, and societies.

The European Higher Education Area needs to allow for more mobility than we have seen so far – this must be one of our goals in the coming years.

I welcome the target set last year in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve that 20% of graduates should have a study or training experience abroad by 2020. My services are elaborating on an EU indicator that would take the Bologna target into account.

As you know, President Barroso has gone a step further; his Youth on the Move initiative sets out that all young people – not just university students – should have the opportunity to spend part of their educational pathway in another EU country by 2020. We are currently working on this idea and will publish a Communication in June.

Quality Assurance

Moving on to quality assurance, let me recall one of the benchmarks of our new Education and Training cooperation framework. By 2020, at least 40% of 30–34 year olds in the EU should have a higher–education degree.

This ambitious goal implies larger student populations, structural changes, and new teaching methods.

As a result, robust quality–assurance systems are going to be even more important than in the past. Because we cannot have expansion at the expense of quality.

The Commission, Member States and university associations have been promoting quality in education for quite some time.

The main idea has been *internal* quality assurance based on peer reviews and benchmarking.

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, set up in 2000 with the support of the Commission, has developed such initiatives.

More recently, we have seen the rise of *external* quality assurance.

At the beginning of the Bologna Process, only a few countries in Europe had external reviews of university teaching.

Pilot projects supported by the European Commission have helped to promote external quality assurance in all EU countries. Finally, in 2008, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education was set up.

The Register is yet another example of successful cooperation between the Bologna process and the EU and can be taken as a model for the future.

Quality assurance concepts are spreading to schools and vocational education and training and more emphasis is put on learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks; it is clear to me that the need for joint action in this area will grow in the coming years.

As a token of our commitment, the European Commission has offered to organise an international seminar on quality assurance in 2011.

Global attractiveness

Finally, I would like to say a few words on the attractiveness of Europe's universities.

The Bologna Process has generated a great deal of interest around the world.

Several non-European countries are bringing their systems into line with the Bologna framework, inspired – among other things – by our Tuning project.

I personally attach great importance to higher-education cooperation with partner countries and I believe that the Bologna Process offers excellent opportunities for that.

We promote cooperation with non-European countries through a number of programmes, notably Erasmus Mundus. But I know we see eye to eye on this issue. The second Bologna Policy Forum to be held tomorrow is the perfect venue to further our dialogue with non-Bologna countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The issues that I have touched upon today are ultimately directed towards one goal: *establishing a climate of trust* in Europe's higher education and projecting this climate towards our societies and our global partners.

Trust is the foundation of the Bologna process and on this foundation we can build our European Higher Education Area.

I regard this as critical, because higher education has become a truly global industry and keeping it within strict national lines is no longer possible.

The European Higher Education Area will succeed if we can find the right balance between the diversity of its many traditions and the strength of its continental scale.

And I have no doubt we will find this balance through dialogue, cooperation, and a common sense of purpose.

I wish us all a successful conference.

Thank you.

Closing remarks for Ministerial Conference

12 March

These two days in Budapest and Vienna have once again shown the strengths of the Bologna Process: it is a voluntary process, led by government authorities who are in charge of their education and training systems at national level, but it is developed and implemented in close cooperation with higher-education institutions, staff, students and other stakeholders.

While the Bologna method works well at European level, we have also heard that this is not always the case at national and institutional levels and that students and staff in some countries consider that they are not adequately consulted in the reform discussions.

The Budapest/Vienna Declaration underlines the importance of this issue and the need to improve communication among all stakeholders and society as a whole.

Also in some other areas we have seen that, in spite of the considerable achievements, a lot remains to be done and we now have a clear agenda for the years to come.

I am thinking in particular of increasing mobility opportunities. This will be one of the main criteria against which the success of the European Higher Education Area will be measured, and so far the Bologna process has failed to live up to its goals in this regard.

In addition, the employability of graduates needs our continued attention. Not enough curricula are elaborated in cooperation with businesses, taking into account the skills that will be needed for tomorrow's jobs.

The Communiqué of Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve called for wider participation in higher education, particularly of underrepresented groups.

This is fully in line with the European benchmark that at least 40% of 30–34 year olds in the EU should have a higher–education degree by 2020.

To achieve this we have to pay close attention to the social dimension of higher education – nobody with the capability to engage in higher education should be kept from doing so for financial or social reasons.

I think that in Budapest yesterday and here in Vienna today we have laid the foundation for a successful first decade of the European Higher Education Area and I want to assure you of the European Commission's continuing support.

Let me close by congratulating and thanking our hosts from Austria and Hungary on this successful conference and for their generous hospitality and I look forward to the Bologna Policy Forum later today.