

Discours de Monsieur François Biltgen, Ministre de la Culture, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche

The reform agenda of European higher education which is underpinned by the agreements reached within the Bologna process has given higher education a new perspective as well as new objectives. The degree structure based on three cycles with the possibility of a short cycle within the first cycle has made European higher education more transparent by bringing about a convergence of structures. Moreover, the introduction of a new degree structure has led to curricular reform. New objectives have had to be defined and among those employability has featured prominently.

In general, the term employability emphasises the relevance of study programmes to the labour market and it implies that the students leaving higher education should have the capacity to summon generic skills, competences and attributes enabling them to seize the opportunities on the labour market. From a content based approach, institutions of higher education have been encouraged to teach and train graduates with broader cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills defined in terms of learning outcomes.

This amounts to a shift of paradigm, which must be set against the changes that have occurred within our economic systems. I will illustrate this point by referring to the system I know best, the

Luxembourgish one. In the course of the twentieth century, Luxembourg's economy moved from one being dependent on agriculture, to one being reliant on industrialisation, to one being to a large extent run by the service sector and we now find ourselves at the threshold of the knowledge society.

This development has been accompanied by an ever greater internationalisation of the economy with huge implications on the labour market. The traditional hierarchical structure of steelmaking and manufacturing industry relied on the subject expertise of an élite with university training and a large shop floor workforce with vocational qualifications and also hardly any training at all.

Today this situation has drastically changed. The labour market has become truly international at all levels; except for the civil service sector more than half of the positions in the Luxembourg employment context are now filled by non-Luxembourgers.

Moreover, more than half of the jobs created by Luxembourg's business over the last decade have gone to holders of diplomas awarded by higher education. The secretary who in the past needed a secondary school leaving certificate has now become an assistant and is more and more often a graduate. In manufacturing there is a shift from the technician to the engineer. Technological change has meant that jobs are changing too. Most job functions are evolving so that higher education graduates are required for jobs that were previously occupied by

workers and employees from secondary or vocational education.

This means that higher education has had to stop being the training institutions for an élite. Today's broader societal context requires that more citizens attain a higher level of education in order to cope with the complexities of modern society and the demands of the workplace. At the same time studying at higher education level will become more banal, in the sense that it will cease to be the haunt of a relative minority.

This is especially true for bachelor degrees. These degrees are also relevant for the labour market; they are a degree in their own right testifying to the acquisition of a subject-specific and cross-disciplinary education that can be applied in tangible situations.

However, the terms "élite" and "mass" higher education still tend to be seen as opposites sometimes. To combine quality and quantity there has been a diversification among institutions of higher education. What we are witnessing today is a broadening of profiles and mission statements of institutions of higher education so that they can respond much better to the various societal expectations that they face. The term quality or the concept of best possible education is then defined against the strategy that the institution of higher education has given itself. The question is whether it is fit for purpose and whether it does what it has set out to do well. This concept stresses the objective of high quality education across

the broad range of higher education institutions. However, the old “elite model” still has a disproportionate influence in society. This can produce confusion for both employers and students. Employers, who are often the product of the old elite system, need to rethink their recruitment strategies.

This is certainly true of the public sector. The Prussian model of higher education by which universities were expected to serve as producers of the social élite still underlies access into the civil service. With its greater focus on formal qualifications, only those with a master degree can enter the higher level of civil service. My colleague, Minister Claude Wiseler, will have more to say on this topic in his intervention tomorrow. At this stage, I would just like to briefly share with you the difficulties the Luxembourg government faced when it came to applying the Bologna cycles to recruitment policies within the civil service. A number of my colleagues relying on statements by certain professional bodies expressed reservations about the value of a bachelor degree as an entry qualification to the labour market. Indeed certain European professional organisations regard the bachelor as a pivot-point rather than a normal finishing point. They believe that the specifics required within a given profession mean that the master should be integrated with the bachelor. This perception also underpins recruitment procedures into most civil services across Europe. We still have a long way to go in that respect, but change is needed to modernise the civil service.

The concept of employability is not only linked to first employment, i.e. getting a job. It is also related to lifelong learning. The demography in Europe is such that the average age of the European population is somewhere in the mid-forties. In ten years' time it will be in the fifties. There will be fewer “traditional students” in higher education in the years to come and those who are tend to shy away from choosing hard sciences and engineering. The central question is how we secure enough professionals to operate Europe as well as how we develop a civic culture that will include and preserve a measure of solidarity between generations. How do we manage to maintain an innovation capacity in an ageing and increasingly diverse population?

Lifelong learning is the most appropriate way of addressing this issue. In an ageing population, advanced education for professionals aged after the age of 40 is of paramount importance if they want to remain creative and innovative within their field. We know that innovation and risk taking tend to decrease with the age. Lifelong learning is necessary to increase these skills and attitudes until a much later age. In this respect the twin concepts of employability and lifelong learning need to be implemented if the Europe is to retain its innovative and creative capacity in a knowledge society.

In our economies we have reached a stage where future developments cannot be adequately forecast. We do not know for sure what the implications of the financial crisis will ultimately be on the labour

market. However, this uncertainty does not invalidate my earlier statements. While institutions of higher education cannot influence the demand side of the labour market, they still must intervene on the supply side. It is in times of crisis that the future must be prepared. Employability means equipping graduates to be flexible workers who can operate in a variety of different settings with ease. This is a way of preventing unemployment but also a way of educating graduates for new jobs. Employability therefore goes beyond training for the narrow concept of what the Germans call “Beruf” i.e. a specific job with a defined set of competences and often related social status. In times of uncertainty flexibility is of paramount importance to empower students to respond to new emerging opportunities.

At the same time, employers should be ready to communicate new employment patterns and to define arising medium term trends in their employment policies. We have organised this conference to contribute to his necessary dialogue between the world of academia and the world of business. The conclusions will be important to define the milestones of the Bologna process beyond 2010.

Thank you or your attention.