

Higher education and employability: a social imperative

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Opening address by Frank Vandenbroucke, Vice-Minister President of the Flemish Government and Minister for Work, Education and Training (www.vandenbroucke.com)

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Almost half a year ago, the Flemish Community of Belgium organised a seminar devoted to the future of the Bologna Process. We did not want to leave the floor exclusively to the inner circle of seasoned Bologna experts. No, we tried to look at things differently, by inviting a dozen of scientists to give *their* views on the challenges we face and on the directions we could or should turn into in the next phase of establishing the European Higher Education Area.

One of the speakers during our seminar was minister Biltgen, who gave an address which was really appreciated by the audience. At the same time, François, you made full use of the opportunity to launch "your" Luxembourg seminar. I am sure that many a participant in Ghent wrote down the details for the promising event you announced at the time.

And indeed, I believe you and your staff have succeeded in setting up a programme which will make the education specialists among us look at Bologna from yet another perspective.

(A necessary perspective...)

A perspective, which probably still remains too often neglected or under-exposed. For sure within the Bologna Process itself, where the focus over the past ten years (understandably!) has mainly been on the development of a whole series of new structures and levers which are instrumental to creating a single European Higher Education Area. But also "back home", in the more familiar atmosphere of our own national higher education systems and sectors, employability and the employers' perspective are not always treated as seriously as other subjects of interest and points of view.

As a consequence of this under-exposure, employability and the employers' perspective tend to find themselves "on the other side", in an opposite position vis-à-vis everything which is supposedly "genuine" to higher education, and to education in general. We all know the clichés which risk to come up easily then: academia and students want to keep their universities clear of "the mercantile instrumentalisation (nowadays, some even call it *lissabonisation!*) of higher education", whereas employers feel invited to blame "the stunning unworldliness displayed in the ivory towers".

As a minister responsible for both education and work, I repeatedly hear those clichés. And I always wonder how they could take root so firmly, since they get rather contradicted than confirmed, not only by history but also by current practice. For whether it is the physician or the nurse, the social worker or the lawyer, the teacher or the interpreter, the engineer or the laboratory worker – in the past they all got, and at present they still get an education aimed at delivering competent professionals to the labour market, more often than not in close collaboration with professional bodies and employers' organisations. And to my knowledge, nobody wants a radical turnover of this practice, imposing universities and university colleges to deliver *incompetent* engineers, nurses, interpreters, et cetera.

Is this too utilitarian a vision on higher education? Is this the impact of the perfidious Lisbon agenda on higher education, as some critics denounce – inspired as they seem to be by a romantic ideal, which in reality hasn't existed but for a very small elite? I don't think so.

(... and a social imperative...)

To the contrary, even: as a social democrat, I strongly believe that education in general and higher education in particular simply cannot be seen apart from the aspect of employability. Let me elaborate a bit more on that.

There is no doubt that over the past decades, higher education has been (and I would like to add: for many youngsters still is) the most effective and equitable channel of social mobility in modern society. In the late sixties and seventies, we have experienced an educational revolution, with a spectacular growth in higher education participation and attainment rates. This revolution was linked to a change in the way social mobility was realised. Merit became key to social advancement, rather than family, social background, money or social capital. Over the generations, young people equipped with degrees acquired social positions, and incomes related to these positions, their parents could only dream of. Higher education became thus the most important channel through which social mobility was to be realised.

A lot can, and in other fora *must* be said, about the imperfections in this system, about the hurdles in this runway towards upward social mobility. Chances to attend higher education and to acquire a degree still cannot be called to be 100% fair. European ministers should address this issue too during next year's Bologna meeting in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve. And they should come up with effective social policies and action lines in order to further raise equality of opportunity in higher education. But that is not what this seminar is about.

The point I want to make here, is that participating and succeeding in higher education in itself does not guarantee upward social mobility. There is usually at least one link in the chain in between. Indeed, not the mere fact of you and me having acquired a degree made doors go open, but the way we made use of that degree – or rather: the way we could avail ourselves of our degrees as entrance tickets.

The notion of *two* directions in the image of a degree as an entrance ticket is crucial here. However imperfect the image of an entrance ticket might be – because it probably refers too much to the concept of credentialism – it nevertheless rightly draws our attention to "the other side", instead of (wrongly) focusing only on the degree holder, i.e. on his responsibility to present his ticket. For as we all know, an entrance ticket turns out to be pretty worthless if the attendant, for whatever reason, refuses to accept it.

Coming back to our subject, one could formulate the basic question as follows: seen in the light of social mobility, what is participation in higher education, however valuable and enriching the study period in itself might have been – what is a higher education degree still worth if it is not considered valuable in those surroundings that matter for social mobility, and on the labour market in the first instance?

Looking at things from the point of view of the youngster at the foot of the social ladder, it becomes crystal clear why we should not neglect the aspect of employability and the employers' perspective when restructuring higher education and designing study programmes. For that young man or young woman will only be able to make the best of the climb on the social ladder, if his or her talents are optimally developed and fully valued. And whether we like it or not, much of this valuation will be done by the labour market, by his or her (future) employers. Hence the importance of employability!

That is, by the way, also why I attach so much importance to maintaining high standards in higher education, and to reinforcing at the same time a culture of achievement rather than annihilating it. Because social mobility through higher education, in particular for the less advantaged, is only possible if a diploma or a degree has real quality behind it and is perceived as such by the outside world. Just because many people can only count on real achievement to realise their aspirations for social mobility, they only have an interest in high quality education, not in degrees of suspicious value. In this sense, quality assurance has a similar social dimension as employability. But that is a topic for yet another seminar.

(... among others)

Yet at the same time, I do of course acknowledge that there are other good reasons for attaching importance to employability and the employers' perspective.

It goes without saying that education, and especially vocational training and higher education, do not only help individuals to unlock their talents and to aspire for a better life, but also help the economy innovate and prosper for the good of the society. It also goes without saying that fighting unemployment, for instance by (re)training people to meet the higher standards of many 21st century jobs, is not only a moral imperative towards the unemployed, but also benefits to the economy and society at large. The same is true for inviting people to participate more in life-long learning programmes.

These are the self-evident reasons, the examples that spontaneously come to our minds and lard our speeches on the knowledge society, the Lisbon agenda and so on. I hope you don't mind my looking from a slightly different angle.

(Challenges for the employers: the right perspective)

These self-evident examples bring me nevertheless to some other issues, which I would call "challenges for the employers".

Looking at higher education from an employers' perspective, I can very well imagine that it is extremely tempting to stimulate schools and universities to make their pupils and students exactly meet the needs and requirements of today's labour market when they graduate. That seems rewarding, for it discharges the employers from having to invest immediately in internal work placements, "acclimatisation periods", specific job training or whatever one may call it.

Doing this, however, would be very short-sighted. We all know that hardly any economic sector remains unaffected by innovation and technological changes – and those that do, don't flourish in Europe anymore. Given this context, the real interest of employers is much more in employees that are able to cope with, and even induce innovation and changes themselves. It is also important to distinguish between the formation of subject-specific knowledge and other, more generic skills, such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork – and attitudes, such as entrepreneurship and a genuine motivation to learn.

Especially those employers, representatives of professional bodies and labour market actors who are involved in formulating higher education policies or governing higher education institutions have to be cautious about always keeping the right perspective.

(Challenges for the employers: involvement and responsibility)

Another challenge for the employers is the extent of their involvement. Being involved in formulating higher education policies, or having the ambition to do so, is fine and into my opinion even necessary. But it also brings responsibilities about. Employers can contribute a lot to providing students with a comprehensive, modern education: they usually dispose of start-of-the-art technologies, the latest insights in their sectors' developments, valuable places for on-the-job training and work placements, et cetera. It must be clear that opening up to schools and universities is not a cost, but a capital investment. That is a cliché as high as a steeple, but many a sector nevertheless seems hesitating to do so.

A particular variant on this theme is the improvement of higher education provisions for adults. The established higher education institutions and employers should collaborate more in order to narrow the gap between the aula and the workplace of the adult learners. They could for instance provide curricula (and why not jointly?) that are responsive to the needs of mature learners, they could organize study programmes in a more flexible way through workplace learning, distance education, e-learning, et cetera.

(Challenges for the employers: democratisation)

A final challenge I would like to mention, is the duty of the employers to subscribe to the agenda of "the second wave of the democratisation of higher education".

I have already referred to the "educational revolution" of the late sixties and seventies, when educational participation and educational attainment grew spectacularly from one generation to another. In those days, a social movement was born in many countries: a unique coalition of trade unions, students' organisations, political parties and others, to "democratise" higher education, i.e. to improve equitable access, opportunity and success.

This "wave of democratisation" was answered, and actually *had* to be answered to make it truly successful, by the labour market, for there was an increasing demand for a highly skilled and professional workforce at the time.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are at a similar point now. A new wave of democratisation is waiting to be raised. For there are still inequalities in participation in higher education. In spite of a tradition of social policies, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and especially children from immigrant background, apparently still do not have the same chances to succeed in education. In many European countries, including mine, they are even hardly represented in some branches of higher education. This cannot be justified from a moral point of view. It is also an enormous waste of talent.

At the same time, when looking to the future of the labour market and the demographic changes ahead, we perfectly know that we will need all talents available and that we cannot take the risk to waste talents. In spite of today's problems on the financial markets and pessimistic economic foresights, we know that we will need well-trained, highly-skilled labour with very high productivity rates in order to keep our labour market functioning, to pay for our elderly population and to guarantee the economic basis of our welfare state. It is, in other words, of utmost importance that we commit ourselves to enable more young people to go to higher education, especially boys and girls from those communities where under-participation risks to result in a real waste of talent.

Seen from a different angle, one could even say that there is no acute need neither to dramatize demographic changes nor to hastily import talent from overseas, given the actual rate of talent still waiting to be discovered and developed on the one hand, and the often heavily underexploited potential for life-long learning on the other hand.

The universities for sure have a responsibility in this. In Flanders, we therefore have changed the higher education funding system in such a way that higher participation and better attainment rates for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, while maintaining the standards of quality of course, will be rewarded. A second wave of democratisation is little by little raising.

But the labour market has a responsibility there, too. If the labour market is not ready and willing to offer these boys and girls equally fair job opportunities, on a level corresponding to their qualifications, then why would they bother about enrolling at the university? At present, the picture is unfortunately not always encouraging. In most European countries, success stories are still too exceptional. We have to turn that tide.

(Conclusion)

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is about time to conclude. I have taken the liberty not to dwell upon the more traditional political messages about higher education and employability, nor to dive into typical Bologna issues, such as the value on the labour market of bachelor qualifications and diploma supplements.

By focusing on the social importance of employability, I wanted to demonstrate that one does not automatically have to think of a mercantile instrumentalisation of higher education as soon as the words "employability" or "employers' perspective" are mentioned. There is a social imperative, too, and that social imperative perfectly justifies, for instance, involving labour market actors more in the formulation of higher education policies. At the same time, this brings about responsibilities, too.

And yes, indeed, higher education is not the handmaid of the labour market and higher education has many values in itself which we should cherish. But let's not forget that the social agenda does not allow us to get stuck in a romanticized view of the "pure" university, stripped of any direct link with the labour market. For then, higher education risks to become irrelevant in normal societal life, turning into a luxury good for those who can (financially) afford not crossing over to the labour market. You will understand that as a social democrat, I cannot accept this to happen.

Thank you.