

Mme Quintin participates in the European launch conference of the Lifelong Learning Programme in Berlin – 6-7 May 2007 (A/4597)

Special Conference, Forum IV: European higher education and the new ERASMUS programme – Europe responds to the challenges of the world

**Making Europe more attractive and competitive – the role of higher education.
The importance of ERASMUS for the European Higher Education Area**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be in Berlin for these celebrations. 2007 is a year of great moments, a year both for looking back over Europe's wonderful achievements of the last 50 years, but also for looking forward to try to define the Europe we want to leave to future generations. And as we look back over 20 highly successful years of Erasmus, so we should also look ahead to what the next two decades will bring in European higher education.

Erasmus a success story ...

There is no doubt, Erasmus is the number one programme of the European Union. It is the best-known, and if I may say so, the best loved. After all, what other EU programme has been the subject of a romantic comedy film? This is not my assessment; the vast majority of Erasmus students themselves say their Erasmus stay was a success; that they experienced valuable personal growth, improved their language skills and benefited personally in a wide range of ways from the experience. They have emerged as a group who know that they are not just citizens of their own country but also citizens of Europe.

Erasmus is in effect an EU trademark, known not just inside the Union but outside too.

In its first year, in 1987, just over 3.000 students travelled to 11 countries. The increase since then has been dramatic – we hit the milestone of 1.5 million Erasmus moves last year: travelling to 31 countries, and involving 90% of higher education institutions in Europe.

...And a catalyst for reform

But ERASMUS is more than a highly successful exchange programme. It has also been a spearhead for the reforms that are transforming the higher education landscape in Europe from a patchwork of different systems into a single European Higher Education Area.

Erasmus exposed some of the weaknesses of European higher education back in the 80s and 90s – its fragmentation; its inwardness; its lack of transparency. The sheer pressure of the vast numbers of Erasmus students and teachers moving between countries weighed too heavy on individual systems. The Bologna Process, and the objective to establish a European Higher Education Area, was born in direct response to the new interaction and transparency which Erasmus brought.

Although there is no formal link between Erasmus and Bologna, the action lines of the Bologna Declaration can be traced back clearly to Erasmus:

- setting up a system of easily readable and comparable degrees,
- developing the European Credit Transfer System,
- [Most explicitly] promoting mobility,
- instigating European cooperation in quality assurance and
- developing the European dimension in higher education.

The European Commission is active in its support for the Bologna process, as a full Member. While all 45 countries may not be reforming at the same pace, the

progress is remarkable. And within Bologna, the EU member states are certainly on track.

The broader policy context that calls for reform of higher education

When we discuss the reform of education and training in Europe, our aim is not simply to create greater efficiency and effectiveness in within these policies: it is much broader than that. Education and training are at the very centre of the Union's Lisbon strategy to of boost growth and jobs, which, in turn, has the broader aim of ensuring Europe's place in the modern world as a prosperous, sustainable and inclusive society with an intact social model.

Education is at the very heart of all this. Europe has already entered the knowledge age. Sweeping changes are transforming our economies. New technologies are changing the way we work and the way we learn. The main factor in wealth creation has shifted from brawn to brains in virtually all sectors. Europe needs to chart a course at the forefront of knowledge, research and innovation in order to stay competitive, in the face of other knowledge-rich economies, both the now traditional ones such as USA, and Japan and the newly emerging ones such as India and China.

To rise to this challenge, Member States need to ensure that their citizens have the skills to thrive in the knowledge society. Ironically, the 'knowledge society' doesn't only depend on acquired knowledge. The jobs of the future require not only holding information, but that people are able to think for themselves, to think critically, originally, creatively. 'Learning to learn' becomes ever more important.

That is the challenge we face. But European citizens do not yet have the level of skills that makes the knowledge economy a comfortable place:

- Only 22 percent of the EU workforce has HE qualifications.
- About 57% of young people have access to HE, but this figure is over 80% in the US.
- With only 15.4 researchers per 1000 employees (1,5 %), Europe trails the US where 9 percent of employees can be linked to research.

While clearly some of our Member States perform better on these indicators than others, no single country can successfully step into the knowledge era by itself. After fifty years of European integration, our economies are so interdependent that advances in one country benefit others. Conversely, poor performance in one country can also affect its neighbours: we should aim to create also a single market of knowledge, within which Europeans should be not just well-educated knowledge workers but well-educated knowledge consumers. Any weaknesses in national education and training systems will limit the development of such a market.

What can we do at the European level? When I say that we must share good practices and together identify weaknesses in the national education and training systems, your reaction might be that these are weak instruments in the face of the importance of the challenges which I have outlined. But recall the story which I outlined earlier. Erasmus – because it brought different systems into contact with each other - highlighted some of the flaws, which in turn sparked off the Bologna reforms – the biggest movement in European higher education in the last 100 years! Exposure to the European level of practices and policies heretofore dealt with only at the national level can be a very powerful force for change; we should make the fullest use of such approaches!

The modernisation agenda for universities

European higher education has enormous potential – it can count on some of the best brains; the brightest students; and a legacy of commitment to original thought and free expression. But this potential is not fully enough exploited to underpin Europe's drive for more growth and more jobs.

The Bologna process gives a framework for success. But we need to go further. We need deep reform of how universities are managed, structured, funded and regulated.

Last year, the Commission issued a Communication on modernising universities, highlighting some of the continuing difficulties for HE in Europe:

- Over-regulation and underfunding
- Not enough variety in types of university, with too many institutions aspiring to provide the fullest possible range of higher education services within systems which have too much internal fragmentation
- Remoteness from society and industry, with curricula that don't meet today's needs
- Problems with academic recognition across borders, and poor career structures

The Commission singled out nine key areas for reform. I'll sum them up in four points as follows:

First, autonomy and accountability.

The relationship between the state and the universities is the heart of the matter. Universities can only become innovative and responsive to change if they can plan and take responsibility for their own activities and their own development path.

Too many decisions - on staffing, student selection, resources, curricula - are taken by ministries.

Linked to this, universities should be allowed to diversify and specialise. In the US, fewer than 250 HE institutions award postgraduate degrees – compared to 2000 in Europe. Universities should be encouraged to find their own path – perhaps in research, or in more teaching, or more related to local needs.

Second, adequate funding.

In 2002, the EU spent 1.15 % of its GDP on the higher education sector compared to 2.59 % in the US. This means a funding gap of about 10.000€ per student per year. We estimate that modernised higher education systems need – and merit – investment of about 2% of GDP. But this does not have to mean opening the public purse: in fact, the extra funding in the US comes mainly from private sources, contributed in the form of fees by learners who can expect to earn increased incomes from their education; and endowments, mainly from the enterprises whose profitability depends on a steady supply of knowledge workers.

Accordingly, universities should take greater responsibility for their own long-term financial sustainability, finding partners in business, foundations and other private sources, including, yes, tuition fees – an issue which is controversial across much of Europe, but which, in my view, needs to be looked at closely.

Third, structured partnerships with business.

We need study programmes that meet the real needs of the labour market. More openness between the two worlds, so students become familiar with business, and less traditional, more diverse, learners come knocking on the doors of universities. And closer relationships between universities and business would make us better able to turn research results into innovative products and services.

Fourth, more mobility: geographical and between disciplines.

We have seen how Erasmus positively affected education systems. More mobility brings more reform. The personal benefits too are huge: it has helped a lot of young Europeans to become more tolerant, more open, more competent. Employers appreciate its value. They look for cosmopolitan, flexible, multilingual staff. And they tend to seek out graduates who've had a period of study abroad – Erasmus students.

Universities should break down obsolete barriers between disciplines, and link research with education – this is where and how innovation happens.

Indeed, the drive to link the three points of the knowledge triangle – research; education; innovation – is the stimulus for the Commission's proposal for the European Institute of Technology, which we hope should get the definitive go-ahead by the end of the year.

The new LLP programme: furthering policy goals

How are we in the Commission preparing to support Member States in meeting these new challenges? I want to talk about the future of the new Lifelong Learning Programme which is getting under way this year. The reform agenda has moulded the design of the new programme. It accompanies and complements our work on good practice and policy exchange with Member States, and it is an integral part of our strategy for modernising education and training in Europe.

A minimum of 40 % of the LLP programme budget of 7 billion € will be devoted to ERASMUS. Every year we will mobilise more than 250.000 students and university teachers, with the aim of reaching our goal of 3 million by the year 2012.

Our programmes are an excellent means of promoting the international visibility and attractiveness of European universities. There is great interest in partnership

from neighbouring countries, and from further across the world. Next year, Erasmus and our other mobility programmes will open to the Western Balkans and Switzerland.

More broadly, through Erasmus Mundus we bring in top students and academics from around the globe. Although only three years old, it is already a success story, a programme which enhances the reputation of EU higher education worldwide. We will be setting out our proposal for Erasmus Mundus II shortly: our ambition is to expand both its size and its scope.

Closely linked to Erasmus Mundus is Tempus, through which EU universities and universities in neighbouring countries work together on curriculum development and university management. Since many of these countries are also part of the Bologna process, this feeds into and strengthens these reforms.

Conclusion

Einstein is reputed to have said the world could only last four years if bees were to disappear – about half of our food depends on bees moving around and pollinating our crops. When I think of what we have achieved in higher education in the last twenty years, I am struck by the cumulative impact of the toil of those who might be termed the worker bees of university modernisation - our individual Erasmus students and teachers. Erasmus, by forcing us all to look outwards, through the people-to-people contacts it engenders and the cross-fertilisation of ideas and reforms it fosters, has made a huge contribution to creating a real European Higher Education Area. The task now is to ensure that the European Higher Education Area can meet the new and ever-changing challenges of the knowledge era. The new expanded Erasmus programme will continue to rise to these challenges.