

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

The future of higher education: Challenges and policy directions. The EU perspective

OECD/France International Conference: *Higher Education to 2030. What futures for quality access in the era of globalisation?*

Paris, 8 December 2008

Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

I am pleased to take part in this opening session of your conference and I am happy to be given the opportunity to celebrate the 40th anniversary of CERI. A lot has happened during this time in Europe and in the world. Western countries in 1968 have passed through a lot of social and political unrest. My country then – Czechoslovakia – lived through hopes of the Prague spring reform process, but later suffered a military invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops. M. L. King was assassinated in the US... Today Cold War is over; Europe is free and reunited, the US citizens elected the first ever afro-American to the supreme office in the country.

After 40 years the CERI enjoys a high reputation among its international partners. It is also thanks to the wise mix of rigorous analysis and conceptual innovation championed by CERI that OECD has come to lead research in education and education policy. As you know, the European Commission has a long tradition of close cooperation with the OECD, and as I wish CERI happy anniversary, I look forward to many more years of fruitful exchanges between our organisations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a time for looking ahead in higher–education. We are approaching the end of an important decade and a great deal of reflection is taking place everywhere on the future direction of our policies.

- The EU is preparing the next phase of the Lisbon Strategy.
- The Bologna Follow–up Group is discussing the post–2010 agenda.
- UNESCO is preparing to renew its global strategy on higher education; and
- Today's conference has "Higher Education 2030" in its title, widening the horizon not by one, but two decades.

The other reason for looking ahead is the unprecedented financial and economic crisis we find ourselves in. We naturally turn to universities in search of the innovative ideas and concepts that will help us overcome the present turmoil and build more sustainable systems in the future.

This is the context for the ideas and questions I would like to share with you today. I will **focus on three objectives** which are among the most urgent areas of reform for Europe's higher education. These are:

- qualifications for the future;
- global attractiveness; and
- mobility for all.

Qualifications for the future

We have seen a lot of progress over the past years with regard to the development of compatible structures and frameworks in European higher education, and the Bologna Process has been playing a central role in this. I am thinking of the three cycles, the qualifications frameworks, the European

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, the European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education (EQAR), ECTS and the Diploma Supplement.

As you all know, many of these are structural measures. Now it is time to have a closer look at the content. Are the qualifications we provide good enough? Are they relevant for the mission of today's universities?

In addition to its age-old mission of preserving a tradition of scholarship, expanding the frontiers of knowledge and nurturing critical thinking; I believe that higher education has two additional functions today:

- training people for high-level jobs in the labour market; and
- preparing for active citizenship.

Back in March, months before the present crisis became so dramatic, the European Council invited the Commission "to present a comprehensive assessment of future skills requirements in Europe up to 2020". Our response is a policy document to which we are putting the finishing touches and which will be presented later this month.

Many students today will end up working in jobs that haven't even been imagined yet. Since we cannot predict the exact nature of these future jobs, we need to develop the concept of an 'optimal skills mix'. This means that we must continue to teach specific skills, but graduates will increasingly need a set of more general skills, such as problem-solving and creativity, language skills, analytical skills, etc.

Educational institutions are faced with the challenge of learning how to impart these new skills. I suppose that in Europe we will see the emergence of sectoral qualifications frameworks, inspired by the Tuning project approach to learning outcomes and competences and describing both subject-specific and more general skills such as "learning to learn".

The OECD, in its new AHELO initiative, is also following this two-fold approach: looking at students' performance with regard to both discipline-related and generic skills. The Commission is pleased to cooperate with the OECD in this very interesting project by providing European expertise on learning outcomes.

Attractiveness

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are over 4,000 higher-education institutions in the wider Europe; but despite this impressive number, our populations are still relatively under-qualified. Not enough of our talented young people enter into universities and not enough adults have ever seen a university from the inside.

Only 23 per cent of the EU working-age population has achieved tertiary education compared to 39 per cent in the US. Student enrolment rates are 25 per cent lower than in the US (57 versus 82 per cent). Also, Europe attracts large numbers of students from other continents, but we certainly do not use our full potential as a global player in advanced training.

What can we do to make higher education more attractive for our citizens and for students and scholars from other continents? How can we make universities more exciting places to study and work? How can they become centres for lifelong learning?

The structural changes we have seen taking place under the Bologna flag are part of the answer, as they make learning offerings more transparent and comparable. But universities also need more autonomy to carry out their mission

and manage their resources more efficiently. Research shows that there is a positive correlation between autonomy, performance and better use of resources.

The Commission has launched a University–Business Forum earlier this year to provide a platform for the exchange on issues like employability of graduates, continuing education, professional university management etc. We also support university–business partnerships through the Erasmus programme.

For international attractiveness, the promotion activities of the EU (Erasmus Mundus and the study–in–Europe web site) should go hand in hand with active promotion by universities themselves.

Mobility for all

From the vantage point of the European Commission, the issue of mobility is inextricably linked to the Erasmus Programme. Erasmus mobility is certainly a European success story if you look at how we moved from modest beginnings with 3,244 students in 1987 to the current figure of almost 160,000 students participating every year. We celebrated one million Erasmus students a few years ago and aim to celebrate three million by 2012.

There is also the non–Erasmus mobility, often for longer periods of study or entire degree programmes. Erasmus and non–Erasmus combined may help us reach some 10 per cent of university graduates.

These are impressive figures, but not enough. The realisation is spreading that learning mobility is neither an end in itself nor primarily a means for self–fulfilment but that the experience of mobility is a vital ingredient of education and training in times of globalisation. It should neither start only at higher education level nor be limited to the higher education sector.

At my request, a high-level expert forum has looked into the key challenges linked to mobility, such as: how can we make mobility the rule for all young people, rather than the exception? Is it a problem of motivation? Will better support in the organisation of the stay abroad help? Or more and higher Erasmus grants? What about student loans?

The Commission is currently discussing the forum's recommendations and will publish a Green Paper on mobility next year, to stimulate the debate. What is clear to us is that, in time, all graduates should have the opportunity during their studies to undertake a recognised period of study or a work placement in another country. All degree programmes at bachelor, master and doctoral level should include a mobility window as an integral and recognised part of studies.

We also have to think about more generous and more accessible student support. Any substantial increase of mobility will require a new partnership of all players, from governments to regions, from businesses to foundations, and from universities' leadership to students and professors.

Closing remarks

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As European Commissioner for Education and Culture I have spoken from a European perspective on qualifications, the attractiveness of our institutions, and mobility for all. But I think that the challenges of higher education are similar on a global scale.

Fair access to higher education, funding problems, convergence versus diversity, quality assurance—these will undoubtedly be the themes you will be discussing today and tomorrow. We live in time of globalization and massification of education. I believe that access and quality of education

becomes very important factor of integration. And we know that education unites. Therefore I look forward to the suggestions this Conference will come up with; some of which, I am sure, will feed back into our discussions with Member States and other stakeholders.

Thank you.