

Address by Mr François Biltgn, Minister for Culture, Higher Education and Research Luxembourg, President of the EU Council of Ministers.

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking our host and colleague, Madame Kirstin Clemet, for having offered to organise this ministerial meeting mid way through the Bologna Process.

The place and the timing of the event are aptly chosen. After Bologna, Prague and Berlin it is now the turn of a country that is not a member of the European Union to host the meeting. This reflects the wider scope of the Bologna Process. The Europe of the Bologna Process covers a wider geographical area than the one of the Union and choosing Bergen as the place for this gathering is an accurate reminder of the international dimension of higher education. The latter is also reflected in the sound collaboration between the hosting country and the rotating presidencies of the European Union.

The fact that by the end of this meeting we will be 45 countries striving towards the same goals testifies to the momentum the Bologna Progress has gathered. Indeed since nineteen ninety-nine, sixteen new countries have joined it and as a result the Bologna Process now stands for European higher education. We should not minimise this expansion since it reflects a situation in which those who do not belong look on in envy.

At the same time in this wider Europe of the Bologna Process, we still share a European history, although we have also been divided by it. Higher education in this wider Europe is European before any other political or economic arrangement. Higher learning and the core values it is based on takes a leading role in educating not only individuals, but also societies, in cultural tolerance. Higher education institutions seem ideally suited to take on this task, with their unique combination of supranational characteristics and their adaptive flexibility to establish links with local national cultures. In this sense higher education is secure in history, not because that history is behind it, but because that which is shared can easily be chosen above the particular.

Then there is the timing of the event. This ministerial meeting is as much about a mid term review as it is about the progress to be achieved in the next couple of years. It looks both backward and forward.

Looking backward we can confidently assert that the Bologna Process has been successful in a way that hardly anybody anticipated in 1999. Legislation has been put in place across Europe to restructure higher education along the three cycles and we start to share criteria for quality assurance; similarly the recognition of diplomas and study periods abroad has greatly improved.

There are, I feel, two main reasons for this success. First, there is the partnership between the world of politics and the world of higher education as represented by the higher education institutions and the students. The politics of change have been founded upon dialogue. Higher education institutions and students have often shed a critical light on the new legislation and on the new structures, while at the same time being the staunchest supporters of the Bologna Process vis-à-vis their own constituencies. It is their commitment that has given life to the new legislation and in some cases it is the institutions that have pressurised their governments into passing the necessary laws so that they could continue to fully cooperate with other European institutions of higher education. In this sense the world of politics owes you respect.

A second reason why the Bologna Process has been so successful is that it is a voluntary cooperation. Except for the Lisbon Convention, there is no international legal provision that defines the way we are supposed to cooperate. The motivation to cooperate is paramount, the desire to mould it into a legal framework has so far been deemed unnecessary. The Bologna Process has trodden this path because of the commitment and enthusiasm of the participants.

Yet while saying these words I realise that in spite of the achievements a lot remains to be done. I see the greatest need in the domains of mobility and the inherent social dimension.

The Bologna Declaration focused on the mobility of students and teaching staff because it was felt that this instrument was indispensable to create a well-educated and internationally oriented workforce; the Lisbon process states that mobility is a way of strengthening the intellectual, cultural, social, scientific and technological dimensions of the aspired European knowledge based society.

Experiencing European citizenship and preparing oneself for a European labour market go hand in hand. Student mobility is thus a way of fostering mutual understanding in Europe's diversity and so it also contributes to the social cohesion of our societies. At the same time the advent of a multicultural knowledge based society calls for competencies that cannot be acquired in one single national context. Integration into the European internal labour market is dependent on a multicultural awareness and mobility is the tool to define this broadened horizon. Mobility enables diversity to be an asset.

Yet we must make sure that the promise of universities as facilitators of cultural exchange and understanding through the transfer of students and staff is not to some degree at least subverted by the currents of global economics. Experience has shown that mobility can easily lead to a situation where mobile students and researchers choose the new country as their permanent home and so brain gain and brain drain all of a sudden become the two sides of the same coin. Cooperation must not increase what has come to be called the northwest southeast divide in higher education with the economic high flyers and their strong research universities attracting the brightest heads.

A second point is that mobility schemes need to be fair and equitable. A student should not be denied access into higher education and participation in mobility programs on economic grounds. This involves rethinking some financing mechanisms within existing EU programmes. We are willing to raise the question if the current allocation keys are the right ones. The themes of the social dimension and of mobility are thus inextricably linked.

Finally it is noted with satisfaction that the Bologna Process increasingly focuses on research and the third cycle. Institutions of higher education are indeed key engines of the knowledge society. They are the primary, though not exclusive, producers of the science and technology on which the knowledge society depends. Historically the university, as we know it today, is firmly aligned with the development of the nation state and with the growth of a professional body or that of an expert society. In this sense the advent of a knowledge society is the culmination of successive industrial revolutions and thus also of an increasingly close embrace between universities and society. Institutions of higher education now fulfil functions that are the corollaries of the intellectual tasks of the university.

The Bologna Process must further sharpen this dimension. Yet, while doing so, we should also remind ourselves that institutions of higher education in general and universities in particular do not only serve the present, nor are they only repositories of the knowledge created in the past. They must be future oriented and their futures are not orderly and predictable extrapolations of the present, but imaginative and unpredictable conceptions of “other” futures, quite different perhaps from the present. As politicians we must provide the framework wherein this work can happen. The Bologna Process must increasingly become a way of treading this path.

Thank you very much for your attention.