

Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik

Speech to The IVth Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Process

Bergen, Norway, 19 May 2005

Ministers, Commissioner, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address such a distinguished audience that includes government colleagues, representatives of international organisations, national officials, rectors and student representatives from all over Europe. And I would like to welcome you to Bergen in the wonderful month of May. I am very glad that you have chosen Norway to host this important bi-annual conference, where you will take further steps towards a European Higher Education Area.

This conference comes at a most appropriate time. The heads of state and government of almost all the countries represented here met just two days ago in Warsaw for the Third Summit of the Council of Europe, to discuss the further development of the political frameworks of pan-European co-operation. They reaffirmed their commitment to a future Europe with no dividing lines, based on shared values and interests, and co-operation with other parts of the world.

You are meeting here today and tomorrow to discuss practical tools for the enhanced co-operation we would like to see in higher education in Europe – a vast area with 800 million inhabitants. We have great challenges to meet, both in creating equal opportunities within our own countries, and in strengthening the European region in the global arena. Universities and other institutions of higher education are vital in order for our societies to meet these challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you probably know, Norway is commemorating the centenary of its independence this year. One hundred years ago, the union with our good neighbour Sweden was dissolved peacefully. *At that time, Norway chose independence, not isolation.* Now, we are more dependent than ever on international co-operation and the exchange of people and ideas, products and services.

A meeting between responsible ministers of higher education in Europe is very much in line with this strong dimension in Norwegian politics. Higher education and research are international by nature, and in Norway, as in most countries, have been at the forefront of international co-operation and exchange.

International co-operation in education is especially important because it is at the heart of development. We have all committed ourselves to the fulfilment of the UN Millennium Goals for development and the eradication of poverty. The second Millennium Goal states that we should ensure that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, are able to complete a full course of primary schooling, and that girls and boys have equal access to all levels of education, by 2015. This goal should also be at the core of our policies for higher education. Capacity in higher education must be strengthened if we are to ensure sustainable results in building basic education for all.

The role played by universities and research communities in securing sustainability is a vital part of our strategy for development. Norway has been running the NUFU (National Committee for Development-related Research and Education)

programme for several years, which aims to transfer research capacity to developing countries and to help institutions in these countries gain access to the international community of learning. The programme is based on equal partnerships between institutions in Norway and in the South. The objective is to promote mutually beneficial co-operation based on the priorities set by the institutions in the South. Norwegian universities are actively involved in the programme.

There are many examples that demonstrate the success of the programme, including a large number of PhD and Masters candidates and research publications.

I know that many of you have the same types of programmes. To those of you that don't have, I will challenge you consider if it could be possible, also for you.

For many centuries, academic institutions have been a determining factor in the democratic, cultural and social development of Europe. And they still are today. Europe is facing challenges in relation to democratic participation, the deterioration of the public discourse and the transformation of multicultural tensions into societal strengths. In response to the last of these, I have called for inter-religious dialogue.

During the past 10 years, religion has risen higher and higher up the international political agenda. Religion is not usually the only or the main reason for conflict. But religion, like patriotism, can easily be misused for political purposes. People often express their desires, their goals and their anger in religious terms. But although religion seems to be part of the problem in many conflicts, we should take every opportunity to make it a part of the solution.

Co-operation between religious leaders and religious communities can be a powerful force for peace. Greater harmony between religions will not in itself resolve conflicts, but it can pave the way for peaceful, durable political solutions. It can foster greater understanding and co-operation within a country and between countries and peoples. My government is supporting *inter-religious dialogue* in a number of conflict areas.

Academic institutions are in a position to play a similar role. They are built on globally-accepted values and are engaged in open dialogue based on mutual trust and the exchange of people, opinions and ideas. Universities have bridged gaps during periods of deep international division. As politicians, we continue to rely on the role universities play in promoting a culture of peace by fostering knowledge and understanding, combating discrimination, racism and xenophobia, and building strong international networks. This role is enhanced by the mobility of students, teachers and researchers in the academic world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Bologna process has played an important part in the higher-education reform in Norway. The structures are largely in place, and now it remains to implement the changes. We have made a great effort to allocate the funds for this reform in close co-operation with the sector itself, including the students.

The Bologna reforms aim at improving the quality of higher education. We believe this also includes enhancing the quality of research at universities and other higher education institutions. Your chair here

today, Kristin Clemet, has recently presented a white paper with proposals for promoting research. These include measures to strengthen government-funded research activities at universities, and to encourage privately-funded research. We call on business and industry to boost their investment in research, and we support schemes to stimulate active co-operation between the business sector and the universities. We also welcome the debate at the European level on how to increase research funding, and on building strong universities for Europe, as the European University Association has put it.

Norway has also been keen to contribute to improving academic quality and directing attention to this area through the establishment of internationally recognised prizes for scientific excellence. These prizes are awarded in areas of science that are not covered by the Nobel Prizes, but the grants are at the same level.

The Abel Prize is awarded for outstanding scientific work in the field of mathematics. It is named after the 19th century Norwegian mathematician Niels Henrik Abel.

The Holberg Prize is awarded to scholars who have made outstanding, internationally recognised contributions to research in the arts and humanities, social science, law or theology. It is named after the 18th century Norwegian/Danish writer and researcher Ludvig Holberg, and was awarded for the first time here in Bergen last year.

Recently, thanks to a donation from the US-based Kavli Foundation, the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters was entrusted with the responsibility of awarding three prizes for outstanding research in the fields of astrophysics, neuroscience and nano-technology. They will be called the Kavli Prizes.

These and other prizes will help to increase the general interest in scientific research, which, after all, forms the basis of the development of our societies. They will also draw attention to the need to raise the quality of higher education and research, which is one of the objectives of the Bologna Process.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have had the pleasure of observing the development of the Bologna Process from the start, when the Education Minister in my first government, Jon Lilletun, was among the 30 signatories of the Bologna Declaration. My term as Minister of Education in the 1980s has given me a deep interest in educational matters. The Bologna Process has turned out to have a remarkable impact. It has led to striking reforms in all the participating countries, and I note that the countries that have recently joined this co-operation have already started to implement reforms.

I think it is important to recognise that this kind of voluntary political process can produce such extensive results in the international arena. Progress is, of course, vulnerable to political changes. But so far, the mechanisms of open co-ordination from the Bologna Process have worked very well. Encompassing so many countries, both within and outside the EU, the process serves as a model that can be applied to other policy areas where national reforms need to be co-ordinated at an international level.

And what is even more important – your co-operation will help to improve the educational opportunities for our children – or in my case grandchildren. This will prepare them better for their future, whatever that brings, whether they are living in a more pluralistic national setting or in the global village.

Let me once again wish you all heartily welcome to Norway and Bergen. I congratulate you on your achievements so far, and wish you every success with the conference.