

Bologna Summit: opening address

I am very pleased to welcome you all to the fifth Bologna ministerial summit. I would like to thank Annette Schavan and colleagues in the German Presidency for their help in organising and hosting this summit.

This year we are joined by colleagues from Montenegro, who have now signed up to the Bologna Process as a state in their own right, and I'm sure you'll join me in welcoming them.

Last month marked the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, which established the European Economic Community. Never before has there been such a prolonged period in European history, where peace has reigned, democracy has advanced, and people of all classes are better off.

That prosperity and cooperation will be supported across the EU and beyond by the creation of the European Higher Education Area. We are stronger together than we are on our own. Our 46 states have the potential to produce 46 times what can be achieved in isolation, for the benefit of students, academics and higher education institutions across Europe.

The Bologna Process is an extremely important catalyst for change. It will support the EU's agenda to modernise universities, helping our higher education systems to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

International collaboration is the only way to fulfil that mission: opening access to higher education for all students, pooling the knowledge of academics, and bolstering businesses with an increased supply of highly-qualified graduates.

Seven years ago, the European Union embarked on “the Lisbon Agenda” to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world by 2010.

The strategy aims to increase employment across the EU by 10 million, while simultaneously closing the productivity gap with the US through a relentless focus on skills, innovation and social cohesion. But, across Europe as a whole, the productivity gap with the US has actually widened. If it continues to increase at the current rate, US citizens will be three times richer than us by 2050.

Today, Europe is facing very different challenges than those of 50 years ago. Our priority then was the cessation of hostilities between us. Now, it is the consequences of globalisation, climate change, and poverty to which we must respond.

More and more businesses are trading in the global marketplace, from multinational corporations to the local bookshop with a simple internet connection and orders from overseas. For companies to possess the skills they need, and their employees to have the best opportunities to advance their careers, we need to raise skills levels in all professions.

Economic reform is not a process we can undertake at our own pace. Napoleon once said: “Let China sleep, for when she awakes she will shake the world.” China’s collective alarm clock went off some years back. Today, she is responsible for half of the world’s manufacturing and set to become the largest economy on the planet within a generation.

Skilled scientists and technologists are essential in this age of

globalisation, technological revolution, and shifting demographics. One solution to all of these problems is to be found in our higher education institutions.

This is our wake-up call. China's success can be measured by the number of graduates it now produces – more than all of Europe combined. In the case of engineering and science, China possesses more graduates than Europe, America and Japan put together.

A recent report by Lord Leitch on the future needs of the UK economy predicted that by 2020, 40% of our jobs will require graduate qualifications. We have 400,000 more students in higher education than we did 10 years ago, but there is still a long way to go in this country to fill those future vacancies. But this is not just a problem for individual countries. The Bologna Process is aimed at developing much more ambitious solutions.

Since its inception in 1999, we have made real progress. The Bologna Follow-Up Group will be presenting the Stocktaking Report later this morning, which details our achievements so far, and it is clear from that report that there have been advances on all fronts.

The most significant area of development has been improving quality. It is no good putting measures in place unless they raise standards and genuinely benefit students and staff. We have successfully set up quality assurance processes independent of higher education institutions, to assess make objective assessments. Most important of all, we have listened to what students say they want to get out of their university experience.

All countries have begun to develop a three-cycle degree system

where students can study for a bachelor's degree, then progress to a master's and a doctorate if they wish. All countries have now either introduced the first two cycles, or have legislation in place to do so. Good progress has also been made in helping students gain access to those courses and move from one level to the next.

And many states are starting to recognise qualifications gained in other countries, allowing international students to meet entry requirements and enrol on their chosen course, wherever that might be.

How we compare courses across international boundaries is perhaps one of the most difficult issues facing us now. The single most important thing to an employer when they are looking to hire someone is not how long that individual has spent in any given higher education institution, but what he or she has learnt at the end of it, and whether they have the right skills to do the job.

This must be what we focus on as we award credits for courses. And indeed, for our National Qualifications Frameworks to comply with the overarching EHEA qualifications framework – which they must do to be compliant with the Bologna objectives - we are all obliged to focus on the learning outcomes of students.

Many countries have started to develop their qualifications frameworks. But those of you who already have them up and running know that implementation can take many years. One of our next tasks must be to consider what kind of support we can collectively provide to those countries that are further behind in the process.

This summit is the opportunity for us to come together and talk through these issues, to share ideas, and agree on a way forward which will

benefit all learners, right across Europe.

Our efforts are not just aimed at those embarking on a degree for the first time, but also at people choosing to return to higher education after time out; or those for whom university hasn't previously been feasible, for whatever reasons. We want to encourage all learners to achieve their full potential, regardless of their background.

Widening participation in higher education will ensure that we have a highly-skilled, internationally-competitive workforce that will help our economies to thrive.

Over the next two days we will consider our collective approach to the challenges ahead, reaffirm our commitment to the Bologna Process as we agree the London Communiqué, and start to consider the future of the Process beyond 2010.

Working alone, we are limited in what we can achieve. Together, we can overcome obstacles – whether physical borders or social barriers - to learning. Every student is an international citizen. Our common education system, and the opportunities it presents, must enhance that status and privilege.

Thank you.