

DEMONSTRATING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

G. MARKOPOULIOTIS:

Chairman,
Minister,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Bologna Declaration of June 1999, which the Minister mentioned a few minutes ago, has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for our own citizens and for citizens and scholars from other continents. Reform was needed then and reform is still needed today, because Europe is lagging behind other higher education systems in the world, notably the United States and Asia.

If we look into our systems and our universities, we will realise that they face bigger challenges and stronger competition than ever before. A quick look at the figures tells us that the situation is alarming.

Tertiary education attainment

While Europe is certainly a highly educated society, only 21% of the EU working-age population has achieved tertiary education, significantly lower than in the US (38%), Canada (43%) or Japan (36%), as well as South Korea (26%).

Access to higher education

While most of Europe sees higher education as a “public good”, tertiary enrolments have been stronger and grown faster in other parts of the world – mainly because families and individuals contribute much more. In the EU, about 52% of the age group is enrolled in higher education. The EU is slightly ahead of Japan (49%) but lags behind Canada (59%) and far behind the US (81%) and South Korea (82%).

Research performance

While the EU educates more graduates in science and technology and produces more PhDs overall, nothing like as many go into research as they would in the US or Japan, we have about 5.5 researchers per 1,000 employees, marginally less than Canada or South Korea, but way below the US (9.0) or Japan (9.7). Two recent surveys emphasising research found that there are only a handful of European universities in the top 50 in the world. The rapid growth of Asian universities, both public and private, is now also challenging Europe – and the US – in terms of doctoral candidates in science and engineering.

In order to change this situation, we need profound reforms; in the Bologna context and beyond.

From an EU perspective, the Bologna process fits into the broader Lisbon Strategy, launched in March 2000. In Barcelona, in March 2002, the European Council concluded that the European education and training systems should become a “world quality reference”. In Brussels, in March 2005, EU Heads of State and Government re-launched the Lisbon Strategy and they have confirmed the central role of knowledge for growth and employment.

Recently (19-20/05/05), in Bergen, Ministers took decisions which will be decisive for the architecture of the European Higher Education Area concerning, inter alia, today’s issue, i.e. Quality Assurance.

Quality assurance

As regards quality assurance, almost all countries have made provision for a quality assurance system based on the criteria set out in the Berlin Communiqué and with a high degree of cooperation and networking.

However, there is still progress to be made, in particular as regards student involvement and international cooperation. Furthermore, we expect higher education institutions to continue their efforts to enhance the quality of their activities through the systematic introduction of internal mechanisms and their direct correlation to external quality assurance.

Ministers adopted the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA and committed themselves to introducing the proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis, while respecting the commonly accepted guidelines and criteria. The Commission welcomes

this result as well as the principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies based on national review. It should be noted that cooperation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions is of paramount importance.

These standards provide a minimum level of compatibility in the form of common references, which are needed in order to achieve the cross-recognition of qualifications and competencies, expected by our citizens and the European labour market. The decisions taken in Bergen will help to achieve that objective.

Quality assurance and accreditation exercises usually take place at national or regional level.

In certain highly international fields of studies, however, trans-national evaluations and accreditations can be meaningful. For this reason, the Commission is supporting sector-led projects to establish European Quality Labels in Engineering and Chemistry. A few more fields of study might follow these two examples.

Achieving the goals of the European Higher Education Area requires substantial efforts from governments, institutions, students and staff. Good progress has been made and there is strong commitment at national, regional and institutional level. The European Commission has taken a number of initiatives and is supporting others. We hope that the decisions taken by Ministers in Bergen will entail more decisive steps to bring the process even further.

Last but not least, focusing on Greece, allow me to underline the excellent co-operation we have with the Ministry of Education, and in particular the Minister Mrs Giannakou, in advancing on the European challenges.

I wish the Conference, Mr. Chairman, every success.

Thank you.

ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ESIB: National Unions of Students in Europe

EUA: European University Association

EURASHE: European Association of Institutions in Higher Education