

Speech by Ondřej Liška for the 1st Plenary Session
Conference of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education
28 April 2009, Leuven

Esteemed Commissioner, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to have the opportunity of opening this conference. We meet on a regular basis; this is the sixth meeting, or the seventh one, if we count the meeting in Sorbonne in 1998. Even so, this conference is exceptional. We have met not only to evaluate the progress we all, and particularly higher education institutions, have achieved since 2007, and to discuss how to proceed during the following two years. We are here to set policy objectives for the next decade. A decade that is likely to be even faster and more dynamic than the one that is coming to an end. This is also why I would like to extend my thanks to colleagues from the Benelux countries for having taken up the role of host and for setting about this demanding task with a genuine awareness of responsibility for future development.

The “Bologna Declaration” has meant a great challenge for all of us – to change higher education in Europe. And it has definitely been a revolutionary change – from isolated national systems towards a platform bringing together representatives of 46 countries, inter-governmental organisations (the European Commission, the Council of Europe UNESCO), higher education institutions, students, employers, social partners, quality assurance experts and other specialists. For the first time in history we can agree, at European level, on common principles that are then implemented by nearly fifty higher education ministers and their administrative staff and, most importantly, by thousands of rectors, deans, academic staff and higher education experts; principles that concern millions of students. No other initiative has set so many players in motion! I consider the fact that there is a joint meeting of all those who have something to say on higher education issues to be one of the greatest achievements of the Bologna process.

The progress achieved in the last decade is indisputable. Nevertheless, there are no less demanding tasks ahead. We have established structures and now we must fill them with quality content. We have designed instruments such as the ECTS and the

Diploma Supplement, and we are working on national qualification frameworks. But now we must make sure that these instruments are used - particularly by students. Our conference therefore also offers room for reflection on what we have achieved, whether we haven't occasionally gone astray accidentally, and what we should do next to successfully bring our ideals to life. The Bologna Declaration was signed in the same year as the EURO was introduced. I wish the higher education diploma could become another common currency in all countries participating in the Bologna process, so that graduates could use it in various countries as freely as they use the euro in the *Eurozone* countries. But there are further steps to be taken! The finalisation of the European Higher Education Area next year will mark the beginning of a new stage, providing an impetus for increased efforts and responsibility at all levels.

This is even more important in view of the fact that our meeting is taking place at a time that is not easy for the global, and consequently our, European, economy. Both Europe and the world are facing an economic and financial crisis, and furthermore, Europe is experiencing major demographic decline. However, it is higher education institutions that have unique attributes that make them the leaders in further development and therefore also important players in the economic recovery process. One of the post-November rectors of Charles University¹ said: *“Good quality research and higher education are not and never will be cheap. Even so, they are necessary for the future of a nation and for its cultural standards which are a prerequisite for future economic prosperity”*. And I am convinced that this applies even more intensively on a European and global scale.

During the Convention of Universities in Prague in March this year, President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, said that *“It would be a mistake to cut public spending on education and research, as this would have a direct negative impact on future growth”*. This further confirms the point. One of our tasks is to make sure that, after our meeting, these messages are taken as a benchmark when we consider our specific circumstances.

¹ Prof. Karel Malý

We all in this room, and our colleagues in universities, public authorities and various organisations, as well as students themselves, can help to ensure that the diplomas of our students and graduates are recognised in the Bologna countries just as the euro is recognised in the Eurozone. We can do this by supporting mobility. The mobility of students and academic staff has been a priority since the very outset of the Bologna process. During that period it has lost none of its importance. On the contrary, it is mobility among European countries that supports the sense of belonging to the continent and that gives content to the concept of European citizenship. Exchanges with countries outside Europe then promote solidarity on a global scale and increase Europe's competitiveness. In my opinion, for mobility to become an integral part of studies, one of the points would be to ensure that study programmes are designed so as to include a "mobility window" in their curricula. The establishment of university networks and the cooperation of institutions within these frameworks can be one of the ways of achieving this. Another way is to support *joint degree* programmes. Mobility is part of a broader strategy of internationalisation of the higher education system at national levels and part of an internationalisation strategy of each higher education institution. As universities will be admitting a number of mature students and learners who might only want to do a section of a study programme, it is necessary to pay attention to those who, for some reason, cannot be mobile in the traditional sense of the word. We should make it possible for them at least to familiarise indirectly with an international environment, and to reap the benefits from such internationalisation "at home", or, possibly, to benefit from virtual mobility.

If we are speaking about priorities, I personally believe that one of our major priorities is lifelong access to learning. I am glad that higher education institutions have taken up this challenge in the "Charter on Lifelong Learning", and it is up to all of us to turn theory into practice.

We are facing demographic decline. This decline will test the flexibility of higher education institutions in admitting and educating new groups of students, in designing new programmes and employing non-traditional methods of instruction. The importance of the student must therefore be recognised more than before. Graduates of our institutions must receive education of an appropriate depth, but also

breadth, across disciplines, so that they address not only problems of today induced, for example, by environmental changes, but also problems of the future that we know nothing about at the moment. They must be ready for fundamental changes in their occupations, they must be able to analyse a flood of information, and also to synthesise and see broader contexts. They must master technologies and foreign languages. Today's expertise will be tomorrow's basic literacy, as we can see in the development of ICT. Future graduates must see lifelong learning as an integral part of their lives. Only in this way can we ensure economic development at times when the population is and will be ageing. For us, state officials, this means a challenge to create good conditions for higher education institutions to tackle this difficult task successfully, and to motivate them and to ensure that we do not waste any talent.

I cannot, and do not intend to, speak now on all topics that are important for the future development of higher education. This is, after all, the objective of our deliberations today and tomorrow. However, in conclusion I would like to mention an issue that is relatively new and which we are all learning about - international diversification accompanied by an emphasis on maximum quality. Along with the growing openness of our systems, higher education institutions and student diversity, there is a growing emphasis on areas that, even recently, have not been typical of higher education, such as lifelong learning mentioned earlier. It is possible to achieve excellent, mediocre and substandard results in each of these areas. In the future it will not be possible, nor will it be desirable, for each institution to provide for the full range of activities for all target groups in society. Higher education institutions should get a chance to excel in those areas that offer good prospects and where they are capable of achieving excellent results. In this way each institution can be supported in what it does the best, and, as a consequence, all capacities and resources at both national and international levels can be used with maximum efficiency. No institution should be eliminated from this development. What we can and must do is to ensure that higher education institutions are of such quality as to be able to do well in an increasingly competitive environment.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention and I wish every success to our deliberations together.