

Opening address prof. Marc Vervenne, rector K.U.Leuven

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It is nothing short of a truism to affirm that the Bologna-process has made an immense contribution to the reform of higher education in Europe. It has provided us with a number of very effective instruments which have made what is on offer much more transparent and accessible. Bologna also brought a new dynamic to education in Europe. It has encouraged joint ventures, and ever-greater mobility and participation in the educational process. It has made itself felt at both the social level and in the promotion of life-long learning.

Clearly, this process has not yet come to an end. A long road remains to be traversed. As we continue along this road, it is essential that the way forward be shaped by the goals and the values that the European tradition has bequeathed to its institutions of higher education.

These institutions are charged with the task of serving the community of peoples that make up this continent. They will achieve this end by providing that community with quality education, education that is grounded in, and nourished by, original, cutting-edge research. In order to fulfill this great responsibility, universities and other institutions of higher education must be particularly attentive to the complex interaction that obtains among (i) the *individual* in her quest for self-development, (ii) the *culture of a particular society*, (iii) the needs of the *broader community*, and (iv) the demands made on us by the nature of *science itself* as we respond to the call to explore the reality around us. The university and other institutions of higher education are called to be an 'open space' where methodological exchange, critical reflection, and unlimited questioning can thrive. And they must achieve this while never forgetting that they are *public institutions* with a responsibility to society as a whole.

If the Bologna process is to succeed, if it is to be applauded, it must enable European institutions of higher learning to achieve these goals. It can do this only if a number of important conditions are fulfilled.

1. First, it must recognize that the university is shaped by the interaction between research *and* teaching. However, it must also take account of the fact that education and research involve different processes and different players. For this very reason, every effort must be made to ensure that these domains do not evolve independently of one another. They must instead be *attuned* to one another. If that does not happen, both domains will suffer qualitative damage.

2. The university's playing field is shaped by the tension between four dimensions: (i) the world, (ii) culture, (iii) society, and (iv) the individual. An exaggerated focus on any one of these will inevitably upset the dynamic balance that is the key to the university's future. This would impair the university's ability to fulfill its responsibilities to the community. To devote excessive or exclusive attention to the

needs of the individual, or to harness the university for short-term economic goals, is to place it in mortal peril. Bologna will be successful if it takes account of such dangers and averts them.

3. Higher education is dedicated to pushing back the frontiers. And yet, the complexity of our society demands that we provide a large group of well-educated women and men. How are we to negotiate this tension between the need for creativity and long-term innovation, on the one hand, and efficiency and the need for immediate solutions, on the other? The answer is the development of a multidimensional 'space' for higher education, within which all partners are appreciated for their strengths and receive the funding they deserve. The creation of such a space, a space characterized by transparency and functional diversity, will enable us to avoid the pitfalls of one-dimensional rankings, and allow higher education to respond to the legitimate expectations of the public. In the European context, this means paying particular attention to the diversity of languages and cultures, and providing for the mobility that will allow this rich diversity to thrive.

4. The university – and all centres of higher education – must fulfill their responsibilities in freedom, but always aware of their great responsibilities. These responsibilities include the following: (i) the responsibility to see themselves as servants of all sectors of society; (ii) the responsibility to ensure their relevance to society; (iii) the responsibility to engage in an open dialogue with all sectors of society in a manner appropriate to institutions of higher education. The *freedom* of 'institutions of higher education' provides the guarantee that they will fulfill their mission to society in view of the fundamental values of that society, and not in view of special interests or pressure groups. These institutions must run their own affairs, they must enjoy autonomy, and they must engage in continuous dialogue with all parties concerned.

5. The university and other institutions of higher education are public institutions. The public character of them implies, first of all, that the financing, however this is done, is the concern of the whole community, and that it serves the interests of the whole community. The interests of the whole community are best served when admission to higher education is determined by talent and attitude, and not by origin, or background, or age, or wealth, or any other incidental factor. The public character of the institutions of higher education, and the university in particular, raises very specific questions in the European context. The diverse processes which shape higher education involve multiple players. These processes originate in different countries. And this means that there is always the danger of incoherence. Those responsible for higher education must therefore attend to the need for the harmonization of the various initiatives, while never losing sight of the principle of subsidiarity. And, finally, the university, in view of her mission, can never be seen simply in terms of the local or even the European context. Institutions of higher education have a *global* role to play. This is part of their very identity. And it must never be impaired by protectionist tendencies.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, the realization of the goals set by Bologna requires great flexibility and great determination. I would like to wish you both of these qualities during the remainder of this conference. And may we never lose sight of the legitimate interests of so many parties – including the university and the other institutions of higher education - who will be influenced by the decisions taken, and the proposals made, in the light of our discussions.

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