

Notitie

State Secretary, ladies and gentlemen,

datum
6 oktober 2004
onderwerp
CONDITIONS FOR MOBILITY

If Europe wants to substantiate its perhaps overly optimistic aims regarding the strength of the European knowledge economy, this will not only require considerable financial investments, but also efforts towards generating a differentiated European labour market *and* a European workforce. By this I understand a workforce that will be a meltingpot of talent and competence from the various European countries and nationalities, in the areas of knowledge that are characteristic of and important to Europe. At least this is my interpretation of the declarations and agreements of Lissabon, Bologna, Barcelona, Stockholm and all these other great cities in which the core and meaning of European cooperation has been and will be defined.

To someone outside Europe this ambition will probably sound quite modest. But we Europeans know better: Europe is a continent on which ancient civilisations have put their mark of unity *and* diversity; Europe is also the continent of large-scale political landslides, which meant that the formation of a nation has by no means always reinforced the formation of a state and vice versa; Europe is the continent that has seen the greatest and most cruel wars; but Europe is also the continent that is elaborating a new economic, political and social structure that is to increase equal opportunities and result in more opportunities for development.

pagina 2 van 11 We are therefore in fact faced with a tremendous task. A vital condition for turning this task into a success is to ensure the formation of real Europeans. Not necessarily globetrotters, but an as large as possible group of responsible citizens who understand both the strength of unity in Europe and the reality of a differentiated European society, and who are prepared to contribute to this. That is rather a tall order. Knowledge without understanding does not leave a lasting impression, and for this reason I consider the mobility of our students one of the most important methods and even conditions for achieving this greater European aim. Some may find this an elitist opinion. So be it. I warmly support all forms of transnational and international contact, but I think that investments in young people who will take leading roles and responsible positions in the future will more than pay themselves back.

In my opinion, mobility is therefore a must and it is good that we will spend the next two days considering the conditions that will enable mobility. There are quite a few of such conditions: sufficient financial means, accommodation and other facilities, command of the language, knowledge about the content and quality of courses elsewhere. All these areas require further action. This morning I will discuss the options and conditions for mobility from the point of view of courses and institutions in higher education. Clearly, it won't do to underline that there are 4,000 institutions of higher education in Europe, so that there will be something to suit everybody's taste. This ample provision is of course great, but at the same time it causes the tremendous problem of choosing from this profusion of courses. How to go about this choice? For this reason I will briefly address the following topics:

1. information by the institutions and course providers;

2. the required quality assurance guarantees about courses and institutions;
3. forms of cooperation between courses and institutions to increase mobility;
4. the need to differentiate and create distinctive profiles, obviously whilst preserving the required quality.

First of all, however, a short digression, for I just have to say that particularly in the Western European countries the need for mobility is marked by too many national economic interests. It is striking that in particular the influx of young talent is promoted without a thought to its consequences. If national governments speak about the need for a brain gain, they have to realise that this will entail a brain drain elsewhere at the same time. This will result in countermeasures elsewhere or to increased polarisation between countries that can provide many opportunities for developing and increasing knowledge and countries without such opportunities. This striking short-sightedness, that is based on national interests, is of course at odds with the European development that is advocated by these same governments. Wouldn't it be a good idea for the countries in for instance the northwest of Europe to pay some more attention to increasing mobility to other countries instead of focusing on attracting talent? But so far my digression. I will now move on to the actual subject of my talk.

1. The need for objective information

Those who intend to go abroad for their studies first need to know their options. Some people will obviously base their decision on the weather, the language, the country and the city, but those who do not wish to start

their time abroad as an academic tourist will need additional information, most notably basic information on for instance:

- the institution;
- the course;
- the degree: Bachelor or Master;
- the orientation: this is particularly important for the so-called binary systems;
- the language in which the course is provided;
- any entry requirements;
- any costs;
- and, obviously, the content of the course.

It should go without saying that institutions and course providers give this information in an entirely objective manner, but this is actually rather doubtful. Due to the competition to attract students, including and in some cases in particular foreign students, the required objectivity is at times placed second to marketing-related considerations. In particular the commercial higher education sector, with its total dependence on proceeds from the courses, is prone to presenting matters too optimistically. In this area consumer protection is still in development. This very much applies to the countries in the east of Europe, but it also applies to the west. In addition, the fact that in some countries the award of a title such as for instance MBA is largely unregulated appears an open invitation to promote all kinds of obscure course programmes that are not assessed under any quality assurance systems. Would it be an idea to put this topic on the agenda of the next conference of ministers in Bergen? It could perhaps be considered to agree that governments or government-authorised organisations provide information by publishing a list of institutions and courses whose information is considered

reliable. I recently attended a presentation of the Flemish Higher Education Register, which is in my view a very good example of provision of information that is clear and useful for students and in principle even available in four languages.

2. The need for information on quality

The information I just mentioned is important for selecting the right institution or course. But, obviously, more information is needed, in particular as regards the quality of courses and institutions. By now large parts of Europe may be proud to possess a respected system of external quality assessment in higher education that is recognised by virtually all parties involved for its contribution to the improvement of the quality of the assessed courses. This is a return on our efforts towards quality assurance and may not be lost!

Quality assurance and a well-developed system for continuous improvement of quality are an intrinsic part of mature economic sectors. As far as I am concerned, it applies to the higher education sector as well: both the social and the economic importance of higher education is such that there are good grounds to state that higher education is an economic sector. And yet it is not sufficient to have a quality assurance system in place. Ensuring quality, meeting certain conditions and guaranteeing at least a basic quality - this is what it is all about! This is precisely why the ministers agreed in Berlin that "... by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include.... a system of accreditation, a certification or comparable procedures...".

Not only does this agreement meet the need to establish quality guarantees, it is also in line with the trend that institutions of higher

education render account of their performance in an increasingly public manner, in exchange for increased autonomy.

There are a number of ways to carry out quality assurance, but developments in Europe so far show a tendency towards leaving this to independent organisations that are considered competent to take independent decisions about the quality of courses. Yet the way in which this is done differs widely: an increasing number of countries adopt a form of accreditation, but in principle each external judgement on quality suffices, irrespective of whether this concerns reviews, audits, accreditations of degree programmes or accreditations of institutions. This information should, however, be made accessible to the public, and therefore action should be taken to establish a system which lists information on the guaranteed quality of courses and institutions of all countries and regions that take part in the Bologna process. Both ENQA and a number of regional and other collaborative ventures are seeking ways to disseminate this vital information, for instance by means of accreditation templates or by making an addition to the diploma-supplement.

3. The need for adequate information on institutions and courses

But that is of course not the be-all and end-all of it! Just imagine you are a student and you are intending to go abroad to take a Master's degree in the field of finance after your Bachelor's degree? That you want to make a rational choice, solely on the basis of the course content, the quality of staff and the quality of the degree programme, because you consider the Master's degree a steppingstone to a PhD and perhaps an academic career? Or imagine that you wish to make this choice because you consider the Master's degree an ideal steppingstone to a life in "haut

finance” and therefore you are looking for a course that is carefully tailored to meet requirements of the top of the professional field? Or imagine that you know yourself well enough to see that you are not a highflyer, but you are gripped by the possibilities to regulate finance in small and medium-sized businesses? How will you find your way in this maze of 4,000 institutions and tens of thousands of courses?

It is not particularly difficult to assess Oxford and Cambridge, the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule of Zürich, the Sorbonne, Leuven, Trinity College Dublin, the Karolinska Institute and other renowned institutions. But what about the other 95% of institutions? What is known about all these other institutions that are less well known internationally but which may provide courses that are real gems? Unsurprisingly, much thought is given these days to developing classifications of institutions; the American Carnegie classification is regularly mentioned as an example. I support such classifications for the purpose of providing information, but I am afraid that classifications will always result in upward pressure. When does a university become a research university? What do we do with binary systems? In other words, how do we prevent that classification will be equated with ranking and that only research universities will be considered real universities? The basic principle of classification should therefore not be any prestige that governors and administrators may derive from the category in which they have managed to position their institution, but the information students and the labour market need to make well-considered choices.

I'll just allow myself another brief digression. When it comes to promoting mobility, we should not expect governments to be the only ones to take responsibility. Institutions and course providers must take a

prominent role in assisting in particular Bachelor's degree students with finding the right Master's degree course. I would advocate that institutions and course providers are given more responsibility with respect to the students. In my view this implies making choices, so that it will be less important to enter into hundreds of joint ventures than to be selective in deciding with whom to enter into such a venture. This may mean that consortia become more important. The options to achieve this include cooperation in courses. We are currently witnessing an -at present still cautious- increase in international programmes for which double or joint degrees are awarded. The joint degrees in particular are examples of cooperation and promotion of mobility. These programmes are receiving some support from the Erasmus Mundus programme, which is only appropriate, but it remains very disappointing that our national legislation and regulations still offer few possibilities to facilitate such international courses. On the contrary: when hearing the tales from the field about the difficulties that have to be overcome or the additional conditions that have to be met, one at times loses heart. In my view, professional associations can play a part in this area as well. The associations of engineers are very much aware of this already and are seeking to ensure that the necessary standards are met. The same applies to the medical profession. Yet much more can be done in this area, and it would be very sensible to do so! In this context I also need to mention students and their organisations. I know that they don't like to be considered 'consumers of higher education', but their experiences seem essential to me in order to complement or amend the information given by institutions and course providers themselves. Wouldn't it be useful if the experiences of students were put to paper and play an objectifying part in the information provided?

4. The need for differentiation and distinctive profiles

In order to be able to choose, there should be options to choose from. Institutions and courses would therefore act in their best interest by distinguishing themselves. This can be achieved in a number of ways: institutions and courses may distinguish themselves for their mission (for instance for their excellence, regional role, close relations with the professional field, internationalisation), for their pedagogic-didactic concept (competence-oriented learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, perhaps even demand-based learning), their teaching method (distance learning, virtual teaching), language (the rapidly increasing English course provision), target groups (children in secondary education, working people, older people, people who are returning to work) and, obviously, content. The latter seems more obvious than it is, for a distinctive profile as regards course content means choosing for certain themes and emphases; making those choices also means daring to say 'no', and this virtually always causes problems with teaching staff as well as the professional field, for the inclination to cram as many different subjects as possible into the curricula of course remains.

Nevertheless, most institutions and courses will not be able to avoid making choices, for only very few institutions can maintain on good grounds that they can deliver good quality in everything. This means that neither institutions nor courses can get around recognising that there is such diversity! Shouldn't we actually, given the desirability to compete with the US and countries in the Far East in the largest possible number of areas, dare to make choices within the European higher education area? And shouldn't that mean that certain types of courses should be given more funding than others?

Making choices requires nerve and a sense of reality and therefore must lead to the recognition that quality and themes are not all equal, but that there are, quite naturally, differences, and that this is desirable. It should therefore be applauded if distinctive features in the profiles of institutions and courses could be given a place in the systems of external quality assurance and the information provided.

5. Conclusions

Ladies and gentlemen, I will conclude. Above I have mainly focused on mobility of students in higher education. It goes without saying that to support the mobility of graduates it is equally necessary to provide a wide range of information, in particular with regard to the value of certificates and qualifications that are awarded. The degree supplement is a good example of this. But in this respect, too, institutions and course providers may be expected to present a distinctive profile for labour market purposes. This is the only way to make clear that differentiation is useful for various disciplines, which will boost the enthusiasm for mobility.

Mobility is a must if we want to make Europe's ambitions come true and capitalise on its opportunities. In order to facilitate mobility and give it substance, a number of vital conditions must be met. Students who want to choose and employers who are confronted with increasing diversity in the available employees must know what is on offer and what is achieved. For this reason the provision of clear information will become increasingly important. This is also the reason why ways must be found to clarify and weigh the differences between institutions and courses; to achieve this, institutions and course providers must have the

nerve to distinguish themselves from each other and to make clear to both students and the labour market that choices can and have to be made. There is still a long way to go before we have reached that point, but I hope that over the next days we will reach a general understanding that the greater interest of Europe and mobility requires our governments and institutions of higher education to take big steps forward!