

EURASHE CONFERENCE OPENING ADDRESS

I am honoured to be given this opportunity to say a few words at the Opening of this Fifteenth Annual Conference of the European Association of higher education institutions. I certainly know far less about higher education and the Bologna Process than any of you, but I had the privilege of presenting the European Commission's strategic objectives for the next five years in the Lithuanian Seimas in January, at the same time as I was presenting its annual work programme. As you certainly know, the new Commission of President Barroso has chosen as one of its highest priorities to put Europe back on the path to long-term prosperity by re-invigorating the Lisbon Process. The twin foundations for a more competitive and dynamic Europe are socio-economic reforms and the establishment of a thriving knowledge economy, based on a common European education area and a common European research area. To achieve this, Europe must bring together its varied skills and resources, to promote and spread excellence, by developing and if necessary creating connections and networks.

The Bologna Process clearly is a vital part of our joint efforts to create a common European area for education. For these efforts to succeed, it is essential to have active associations such as yours, which embody the networks that underpin such a common education area. Indeed, I am firmly convinced that networking and connecting are keys to success in our newly-enlarged European Union, and perhaps not just keys, but an essential pre-condition for this success.

The Socrates and associated programmes are one very good example of networking, especially in the case of Lithuania which has been a very active participant, running its own Erasmus courses for musical conductors at the Vilnius Music Academy. But Socrates is far from the only such example.

During the pre-accession process and continuing to this day, the Commission has funded so-called twinning projects in the new Member States, whereby experienced officials from relevant ministries and departments of old Member States would come to work together, on the spot, with their – in our case Lithuanian – colleagues, to help them absorb the *Acquis Communautaire* and prepare for implementing the body of EU legislation and practice. In many cases, durable links have been created. Twinning has also been a healthy process in that

the experienced officials from the old Member States have been made to question their own acquired ways of working. So, although no-one can ever claim 100 % success, this type of networking definitely created a win-win situation.

Another, very different, example of networking, is the decision to manage the EU's competition policy in a more decentralized way, by associating national competition authorities with the Commission Competition Department.

The point I would like to make is that networking within the EU takes on many different forms and is a phenomenon of general importance. But perhaps nowhere is it as well developed as within the education sector. I feel we have much to learn from you.

Of course, there are always delicate questions of balance between the centre and the different hubs of such networks, and there is perhaps no uniform solution across different sectors of activity. But we do not wish to remain in what some may see as our ivory towers in Brussels. We in the Commission are aware how important it is to give real substance on the ground to our joint European efforts, and see the establishment of trans-European associations and networks as helping to lay the foundations for the Europe of the future.

The wider impact of your work and of the approach you are developing cannot be underestimated.

In this connection, I see that one of the themes of your conference is quality assurance on a European level. Here I think you touch on a critical aspect for the success not just of education, but of all types of European networking.

Inter-cultural competencies and abilities, and the ability to work across sectors with sometimes quite different types of bodies are also important questions, from which wider lessons may need to be drawn.

You therefore have in the Commission convinced supporters of the work you are carrying out. I hope you have a fruitful and stimulating discussion over these two days, and I wish you every success in this important conference.