

## **Widening Participation**

Professor Roger Ellul-Micallef, President of EAN

I would like to start with a note of thanks – to Mr Lars Lyng Nielsen, President of EURASHE, for having invited me to address you today, and a note of tribute to two wonderful people who it was my privilege to know and who made enormous contributions to European Higher Education. One is the late Roland Vermeesch, pas President of EURASHE who passed away in Ghent only last June and with whom I had a working relationship in the Bologna Follow Up Group. The other is Maggie Woodrow, a tireless campaigner in the cause of access and whose name became synonymous with the European Access Network which she co-founded and of which she was the executive director for many years. Both deserve to be remembered with gratitude by all who toil in the field of tertiary education.

Higher Education Institutions and their activities remain central to the development of society and the strengthening of those democratic values which we all cherish. The Lisbon Strategy acknowledged that higher education is absolutely crucial for the achievement of its goals. Access and equity are among the more important core values on which the further development of our institutions of tertiary education are based. Institutions of Higher Education no longer exercise a monopoly over higher learning and are being viewed less as the sole and exclusive purveyors of advanced knowledge. It has now become fashionable to see tertiary education institutions as one part within a broader and wider constellation that is begin referred to as “Knowledge Production”. But guaranteed access to them should remain a public concern. A mid-term look at the Lisbon Strategy taken in 2005 shows the outcome to be somewhat disappointing. A Commission Communication entitled “Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy” became available in April of that year. It laid emphasis on profound curricular renovation, better institutional management and higher and more efficient funding.

The responsibilities which society requires Institutions of Higher Learning to meet have never been so heavy as now. These responsibilities will continue to expand in complexity and in consequence. The community expects these institutions to help anticipate and foresee change in the world of work. The knowledge, skills, competence and qualifications that we impart must be in keeping with the ever changing demands that a dynamic and frequently unpredictable economy make of our world. This is a time of major challenges but also of great opportunities. Our institutions must continue to be not only academically excellent but also financially sustainable. The tight constraints on public funding have been with us for some time now. We have become, as institutions, more entrepreneurial. Having been nudged, we have travelled – some more than others – down the road that leads to the market place. Student numbers are still increasing and institutions need to come up with sustainable strategies with respect to teaching and research as well as quality management systems. The problem of mutual recognition of accreditation is still within us although the recent formation of a consortium of accrediting agencies from a number of European Countries, ECA is a step in the right direction. In Bergen, ministers agreed to the setting up of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) based on learning outcomes and competences acquired at different levels and in all segments of education and training. The funding of European Institutions of Higher Education and the consequent matter of tuition fees remains a controversially hot topic and was last year the theme of an EUA spring conference in Hamburg. Students through their ESIB representatives, I think cogently and correctly, argued that tuition fees would be nowhere near the contributions needed to till the funding gap. It will only mean that disadvantaged students would find it more difficult to gain access to tertiary education unless adequate student support systems are put in place.

Life Long Learning is a seamless continuum that should be owned by all institutions of Higher Education as a core part of their activities. All institutions should fling open their doors and widen access to students of older age groups by seeing that pedagogical as well as organisational changes are in place and that there is sufficient flexibility in terms of admissions and course structures to attract and retain students who wish to improve their level and range of skills. It is only in this manner that their employability, fulfilment and active citizenship may be achieved.

Governments and Higher Education Institutions must together be committed to a long-term vision of a Europe of Knowledge. Naturally higher education should remain first and foremost a public responsibility. Only thus will it be ensured that these institutions continue to maintain those academic values needed to play an essential role in advancing social, cultural and economic development and to achieve overall excellence. Governments must empower our Institutions of Higher Learning, strengthening their academic freedom by providing stable legal and funding environments. At the Prague meeting in 2001, Minister of Higher Education reaffirmed the need, a need that had been emphasized by students to take account of the social dimension of education when forging the Bologna process. They confirmed their commitment to pursue the removal of all obstacles to the free movements of students, teachers, research workers and administrative staff and emphasized the social dimension of mobility. In Berlin, at their next meeting in 2003, the Ministers again stressed the importance of the social dimension in the building of the European Higher Education Area. Their declaration bears repeating: "The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social inequalities both at a national and a European level." Ministers again reaffirmed their position that Higher Education is a public good and a public responsibility. A Bologna Seminar proposed by France in the Berlin-Bergen work programme and organised by the French Ministry of National Education in co-operation with ESIB was held at the Sorbonne University in January 2005, the University which saw the birth of the Bologna Process in 1998; revealed that competitiveness and the social dimension can and should co-exist and be comfortable bed fellows. Social cohesion and economic development are interdependent. Equity of access for under privileged students coming from poor families or minority groups is of fundamental importance in trying to achieve social cohesion. Widening access for the underprivileged has, besides important social implications, also very relevant economic effects. The momentum which the social dimension gained in Berlin and which was maintained in Bergen in 2005 must be kept up in London later this year. It is mainly in the last two years, through the efforts of a Working Group led by Sweden and which has among its members, EUA and ESIB representatives, that ways are being found of exploring how the political commitment expressed may be transformed into concrete actions. This working group is proposing an ambitious programme for Ministers to adopt in London, asking them to "aspire to the societal goal that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of our populations." The working group is also proposing that Ministers should take concrete measures in a national context in order to achieve this. That is what the EAN has been campaigning for since it was set up in 1991.

The main aim of the European Access Network, which is an international, independent, non-governmental educational association, seeks to promote access to higher education and training in all European countries for those who are currently under-represented, whether for reasons of gender, ethnic origin, nationality, age, disability, income level, family background, vocational training or earlier educational disadvantage. In spite of all the efforts and good work put in by the EAN, on whose executive committee representatives from Australia, Canada and the United States also sit, it is obvious that a great deal more needs to be done.

The matter of admission to Institutions of Higher Learning has at times been fraught with emotion and not too infrequently mired in politics. A report by Kati Haycock on behalf of the Education Trust, a non profit research and advocacy organisation in the US, released at the end of August last year and appropriately entitled "Promises Abandoned: How Policy Choices and Institutional Practices restrict College Opportunities", highlights practices on the part of some US Higher Education Institutions that are very worrying. This report underlines the fact that there is still a long road to travel along before equity of access and before upward mobility for motivated students is attained. It accuses some Institutions of Higher Education in the States of driving students coming from low-income families, or are members of minority groups away from colleges and universities. Those students from these groups, who eventually gain access, states this report, are "attending in ways far less likely to lead to a degree". This is happening because university administrators are not rewarded for attracting and educating needier students but for admitting the high-fliers into their institutions. This reports provides a lot of food for thought. We may not have suite got to that stage in Europe – but there is certainly no room for complacency. It was, on the other hand encouraging to read the 76 page report published in September of last year, prepared by a Commission appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, and of which Kati Haycock formed part. The report, "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education" calls for a change in the affordability and accountability of US institutions of higher education. One welcomes the attention which this report gives to access and affordability and the importance it attaches to extending higher education more widely and more equitably in society. The Commission expressed its serious concerns regarding access to higher education for students from low-income families and minority groups. As in most European countries, in the U.S. it has been found that "qualified young people from families of modest means are far less likely to go to college than their affluent peers with similar qualifications." The Report added that too many students in the US are either discouraged from attending college by rising costs or take on worrisome debt burdens in order to do so.

In the age in which we are living, with Globalization and Information Technology talking pride of place, Higher Education has increasingly come to hold the key to one's future healthy income. Hard work and greater efforts rarely make up for lack of training, required knowledge and desired skills. Lack of education, particularly at the higher level, is behind the low economic mobility that has reappeared since 1980, even in the so called more developed countries, particularly UK and the USA. In spite of many solemn promises that have been made by politicians over the past five decades or so, from Lyndon Johnson to Tony Blair, their targets, that every person will receive all necessary help to acquire all the training and education that he or she is capable of acquiring, are far from being achieved. I fear that we may well allow Higher Education to stray from its core mission – successfully training for all those who are capable and willing of completing their education to the highest level possible. For this to happen, fairness and transparency in university admissions are essential. I do not think that we are anywhere near achieving the Lisbon objective that 50% of our young people should complete Higher Education.

The reasons for the growing inequality in the participation of low income students in higher education are well known to most of us and need hardly be tackled in any great detail here – but the escalating costs of tertiary education in many countries, in Europe and elsewhere, are certainly to be carefully evaluated.

Access is not the only stumbling block that students from lower income or minority groups have to overcome. Economic pressures on student matters – and matter a great deal. What educational institutions do to retain these students and ensure they successfully navigate the various pitfalls they may come across during their training periods is also of crucial importance. In Austria, for instance, about 50% of all tertiary education students drop out, and they are mostly those from a modest background having limited financial means.

In the UK, a debate on university admissions was recently launched by Professor Steven Schwartz, who was asked by the Secretary of State for Education to be the person responsible for examining the fairness of the university admission system in Britain. This debate led, after proper consultation, to a ninety page report published in September 2004 that includes a set of recommendations. Rightly, he said, admissions should be the responsibility of Institutions of Higher Education themselves, as long as choice is based on established previously agreed upon criteria. Schwartz has recommended that institutions should opt for their own assessment methods allowing them to select their own students. But – and it is an important ‘but’, Steven Schwartz emphasized in his report, “it is important that everyone has confidence in the integrity of the admissions process”.

All agree that a fair admissions system is one that ensures equal opportunity for all applicants, regardless of background, to gain admission to a higher education course that is suited to their ability. Everybody seems to be of the opinion that such a choice should be based on merit. Of course the problem arises when one tries to define merit. Although prior educational attainment data remains the best single indicator of success, I feel that admission should not be based solely on the grade or marks obtained prior to seeking a place at a higher education institution; but that a ‘holistic’ approach be adopted, contextualising an applicant’s achievements given the applicant’s learning opportunities and circumstances. Schwartz claimed that it should not be the task of Higher Education admission boards to compensate for educational or social disadvantage but he did concede that identifying latent potential and talent, which may not have been shown by exam results, may be a legitimate aim for Institutions of Higher Education is in seeking to recruit the best possible students regardless of background. The crux of the problem remains the defining of a fair admissions system and its transparent implementation. Taking on board the recommendations of this report that has been described as ‘insightful’ should ensure that disadvantaged students are not penalised and that the admissions system offers all applicants access to the education that best meets their needs and abilities regardless of race, creed or social background.

Higher Education will continue to be the basis of economic opportunity in this information age. It forms the cornerstone of Knowledge production. We must not fail our young students. We ought not to allow them to simply give up because they perceive a place in an Institution of Higher Learning as attainable. We must not let them be scared of completing their education because they dread involving themselves in debt. We need to strive further to ensure equity of access, to open the doors of our Institutions of Higher Education wider, and once these students are in, to provide them with all the help and encouragement necessary for them to achieve success. We must, under no circumstances, allow Higher Education Institutions to become bastions of privilege but we must continue to strive to ensure that they continue to function as oases of opportunities. In order to achieve this we must all work together, we must pull in one direction – the right one.

It was encouraging to learn that Sir Roderick Floud, EUA Vice-President at the 4<sup>th</sup> EUA Convention held in Lisbon at the end of March earlier this year, whilst pointing out that micro-management and over-regulation stifle innovation and efficiency underlined the importance of addressing the issue of lifelong learning and widening participation as means of responding to the needs of the European Knowledge Society. The tools being made available by the Bologna Process, he said, should be used to widen participation to the many in society who have been excluded for far too long. Only then, I believe, can Commissioner Jan Figel’s “European dream” for higher education come true.