

Dear Mr. President,
Dear ladies, dear gentlemen,

It is my honour to open the EURASHE seminar on Life-long learning here, at the premises of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic. It is a pleasure to see a number of guests coming from all over Europe, it is also promising to see a reasonably large group of Czech participants. I am glad that we at the Ministry of Education could have contributed to the support of a seminar aimed at the EURASHE sector and dealing with the issues of life-long learning. I would like to pass the regards and best wishes from prof. Růžička, the deputy Minister for Higher Education who could not have been present due to his engagements.

The theme of your seminar is quite important in the current developments not only in the Czech situation, but in the entire European higher education. The term life-long learning has been around for long years, a number of people used to talk about it. However, within the last years it seems to get more concrete shape. The Bologna process has promoted not only a synergy of development throughout Europe, but also a better understanding through sharing experience of different countries and different stakeholders. A different pace of development of tertiary education systems in individual countries allows us to learn from each other, find new sources of inspiration. And I believe that this seminar will provide another chance to do so.

Higher education in the Czech Republic has undergone – like in other countries – substantial changes. And it is clear that the process has not reached its very end at all. The number of enrolments to higher education is about three times more than it was in the beginning of 1990s. New higher education institutions have emerged on the scene, including the private ones or those placing emphasis on applied science and strong links with the labour market. Almost all study programmes have adopted a new structure emerging from the conclusions of the Bologna process. A new sector of higher professional schools and colleges brought a new dimension to tertiary education. Academic representation plays an important role in policy and financial discussions and became an integral consultative partner within decision making processes. The system of accreditation managed to keep the higher education system relatively coherent and stable even during the difficult times of its rapid expansion. And I could list a number of other achievements ...

However, there are always a number of challenges ahead of higher – or as we use to say tertiary – education including the sector of higher professional education. There might be a better interaction between higher education and world of labour, there are groups of people who might have more complicated access to tertiary education, the system should promote meeting needs for innovation, capture and updating the knowledge, schools might get more autonomy in their strategic plans, but should respond to the needs within the society. The system of the entire tertiary education could be more open and promote mobility and transfers between its different levels. We are trying to find a systematic way how react to these impulses. The aim of our efforts is to assist institutions of higher education to play an important and relevant role in the society and support the development of the country, of regions, population and their knowledge.

There are some key initiatives of the Czech government and I am sure that you will hear about them during the seminar in more details. There is a draft White paper on tertiary education being developed; it has only recently entered another stage of the discussion. It comes with a number of proposals for changes and adjustments which

may balance the roles of stakeholders within tertiary education in a slightly new way, which should promote mutual communication between higher education and its clients and external environment. The OECD country note within the thematic review of tertiary education brought new views and inspiration at the end of 2006. There is a Strategy for Life-long Learning implementation of which is at the moment being planned. And there are thoughts of a new act which would embrace the entire tertiary education from the short-cycle programmes up to the doctoral studies and scientific activities of universities. We have also eminent opportunity of allocating the European Structural Funds to the areas of prior importance. This should, hopefully, allow us to implement the required changes more smoothly.

We are also interested to learn about others experience with structures promoting life-long learning activities. The Czech National qualifications framework is still at the stage of preparation, especially at the level of tertiary education. There have been some steps taken, including the first attempts to draft the descriptors for individual levels. There is a large space for discussions and agreements with academics, employers, other partners how to approach qualifications, how to use them and what benefits could different approaches bring. There is a fair basis for such discussion as there is a law on recognition of results of prior learning; there has been a fair progress with linking qualifications to a system of professions. Nevertheless, most of this progress has happened within the vocational education and training sector – and tertiary, in particular higher education might require somewhat different approach. It is therefore interesting to hear the experience from countries which have been at the forefront, including those which went through the certification of their qualifications system. And how it is reflected in real life of universities and higher education institutions, as well as how does that satisfy needs of the labour market and people who would like to enhance their qualifications.

There is another reason. The Czech Republic is getting ready for its Presidency of EU in the first half of 2009. It is a period when the Ministers of Education will meet again within the Bologna process, this time in Leuven, almost at the end of the process. One of the key issues will be identification and agreements on topics and priorities for the coming post-Bologna era, how will be the European development coordinated, how to proceed further on. The Czech Republic would like to contribute to the process from its presiding position. Therefore it is important for us to listen to the others. It is very likely that the key themes will be linked to the concept of life-long learning. We will have to pay attention to the meaning of diversification and impact of diversification of tertiary education. What are the mutual links? What would be the opportunities and conditions for transfer between different strands of tertiary education and different levels? How to promote the best cooperation of different types of institutions or programmes? How to ensure the involvement of key stakeholders including students and employers?

I believe that some of these would be also the topics discussed during the seminar. And I will be glad to learn about the seminar conclusions. At the same time after sketching the higher education policy agenda, I hope that you would understand the situation and accept my apologies for not being with you at the seminar for the entire time. And should I miss anything, I hope to get more details the next time as we are going to promote hosting of the EURASHE annual conference in Prague in May 2009.

Once more welcome to Prague and enjoy your stay here including the seminar