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Role of higher education and culture for the future of Europe¹

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Vesel sem, da lahko sodelujem na tem jubilejnem srečanju Teološke fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani. Danes praznujemo štirideseto obletnico neprekinjenega dela mariborske enote, čeprav vem, da vaše delo posega celo dlje in obsežneje.

Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to participate in this festive occasion for the Theological Faculty of the University of Ljubljana. I understand today it is 40th anniversary of the continuous work of the Maribor unit. But I know – your way of development is richer and longer. Vitality and academic freedom of universities is important sign of overall societal vitality and freedom. So, please, receive my congratulations and all my best wishes for the future.

The need for reforms in higher education

The idea of the university was conceived and developed in Europe. Since the Middle Ages universities have been to the fore in

¹ Evropski komisar Ján Figel' je imel to predavanje na Tomaževi proslavi v Mariboru 3. 3. 2008. Članek je objavljen tudi na komisarjevi spletni strani: http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/figel/speeches/docs/08_03_03_maribor_theology_faculty_en.pdf

developing knowledge, seeking truth and in defining values - human rights, dignity of person, democracy, respect for the opinions and beliefs of others. In short, universities have been important building blocks of modern Europe. And we look to them still today in a number of ways - to help guide the process of European integration; to help preserve cultural diversity while at the same promoting intercultural understanding. Universities are crucial for Europe's growth, jobs and social cohesion. However, it is equally clear that in many cases they are not in a position to deliver their full potential.

Most are not well prepared for the increasing challenges and this has resulted in significant performance gaps with respect to research and higher-education systems in other parts of the world.

The main factors explaining this situation are known:

- Fragmentation in rather small national systems and sub-systems;
- Insulation from the needs of the labour market;
- Uniformity and over-regulation;
- Under-funding, both in higher education and research.

But, universities and higher education have never been a higher priority for the EU. In our *Agenda on the Modernisation of Universities* we urge Member states to foster modernisation, restructuring and innovation.

This sense of urgency is also reflected in the renewed Lisbon Agenda. Education - and higher education in particular - are regarded as crucial for the strategy towards era of knowledge and globalisation.

The Commission calls for three types of reforms to tackle these challenges: more funding, better governance, and curricular reforms. I will quickly go through the first two points and then go into curricular reforms in more detail.

Governance reforms should aim at better management of higher-education systems and institutions. In particular, we advocate a new partnership between public authorities and universities. The former would focus on developing the system as a whole, while universities would enjoy real autonomy and responsibility for managing their own strategy, priorities and resources.

Funding reforms are about increased and more efficient funding, through targeted investment in quality, innovation and reforms. This would enable universities to convince stakeholders that they will get good value for their money. The case for investing in universities - provided they are modernised, focussed and effective - is strong.

Curricular Reform: The Bologna Process

The third point – curricular reforms – is related to the Bologna Process; and this is why I would like to expand on it a bit longer. I also feel that it may have some specific relevance for the future of theological studies.

What is the Bologna Process about? In a way, it is about re-establishing a Europe-wide area of academic mobility as it existed in the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the modern period. Incidentally, that was also the time when theology was still the dominant university subject, side by side with the liberal arts of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*.

One of the emblematic personalities of this era is Erasmus of Rotterdam, the man after whom we have named our flagship mobility programme. He was also theologian and humanist.

Things have changed a lot since the time of Erasmus. Theology passed the lead to Law in the 17th century, and then it went on to the sciences and engineering in the 19th century.

The number of universities and other higher-education institutions has grown steadily, until it literally exploded in the past few decades. Participation rates grew accordingly, from the chosen few that enjoyed the privilege of higher education in the 15th or 16th century to the so-called “massification” of higher education today.

Higher education structures, based on the *Baccalaureus*, the *Magister*, the *Licentiatius* and the *Doctor* in most European universities, were subject to national reforms during the 19th and 20th centuries. Countries invented their own very specific degrees, with the result that academic mobility became increasingly difficult.

But hurdles to mobility were not the only problems for higher education in many European countries by the end of the last decade. Programmes were too long in many countries and fields, and drop-out rates unacceptably high. Consequently, the cost of education was too high for students, households, and public authorities. Also, graduates would sometimes enter the labour market very late – at 28 or 30.

There was often a mismatch between the profiles of graduates and the needs of the labour market and, as a result, unemployment among graduates was high in many countries. Finally, there was the problem of recognition, both within Europe and also for non-European students after their return to their home countries. This was because the long one-cycle degrees in many parts of Europe were not compatible with the undergraduate/graduate system that was prevalent in most parts of the world.

The Erasmus programme, which started in 1987, brought many of these aspects to the fore. The Commission reacted by proposing tools for transparency and quality assessment; such as the European Credit Transfer System, the Diploma Supplement, Thematic Networks, etc.

By the end of the 1990s, most European countries agreed it was high time to go beyond purely national reforms and to take a more co-ordinated European approach. The vision of a European Higher Education Area – to be achieved through the Bologna Process – was born. Slovenia is a part of this from the beginning.

The Bologna Declaration proposed a system of easily comparable degrees, structured in two cycles and combined with a credit system and appropriate quality assurance procedures. Tomorrow in Brussels we launch the European Quality Assurance Register.

Such comparisons highlighted specific problems in certain countries and areas while making it clear that there was a European dimension to these issues. This is crucial: we are talking about challenges that require a European approach rather than national or regional ones. This explains why the process developed so fast from the start, with ever more countries knocking on the door to join. Today, as you know, there are as many as 46 participating countries. E.g. Kirgizstan and Israel as non-European countries applied for membership as well.

There is no doubt that the EU policies for higher education and the Bologna process are driven by the same spirit and support each other.

The case of theology

Representatives of the regulated professions, like law, medicine and engineering, have in the past years often declared that they felt unconcerned by the structural changes intended by the Bologna Process: although their disciplines were confronted with similar challenges as the ones I described, they simply wanted to maintain their traditional long one-cycle degrees.

Similar positions could be heard from some departments of theology. However, I would argue that the Bologna Process is not only relevant, but can indeed come to the revitalization of theology as a discipline taught in higher-education institutions.

Theological faculties, generally speaking, do not suffer from overcrowding, unlike – say – business studies or law. On the contrary, in most countries student enrollments in theology have been de-

clining for many years. In times of scarce public funding for higher education this inevitably reopens the debate, at least at public universities, on theology as an academic discipline.

I think the solution to these problems is *inter alia* a thorough reform of study structures and contents. This is nothing new to university-based theology, as you know better than I do: perpetual change was a constant of its development since the setting up of the very first universities. The motto "*ecclesia semper reformanda*" equally applies to theological studies.

Theology and "Bologna"

But it will not suffice to deal with the challenges of departments and schools of theology. This is where the Bologna Process comes in. The key words emerging from Bologna are curricular reform, employability, multi-disciplinarity and networking of institutions. Bachelor – and Master – Programmes should be combined with programmes from other disciplines which can attract young people from Europe and beyond.

The hermeneutic and methodological skills and tools that a Bachelor degree in theology of 3 or 4 years can provide are applicable and useful far beyond the realms of theology and religious pedagogy. In particular when combined with elements from business studies, psychology, journalism or other disciplines. Of course they can also serve as a sound basis for a Master programme in a related area.

Bologna is also about strengthening the European dimension of higher education, for example through study courses offered by two or more higher-education institutions in different countries, leading to a joint degree.

I can imagine that in the spirit that characterizes the CCEE you might develop innovative joint programmes that would provide unique study possibilities to interested people from all over the world. I am convinced that study programmes in theology and religious pedagogy can benefit greatly from a curricular reform along these lines.

As for any other field of study, persuading young people to take up theology cannot be about a simple change in structure: what counts is content, employability, societal perspective and personal development. Gone are the days when the career prospect of a young student of theology lead straight to priesthood. But space for application today is broader and more diverse.

Today universities and other higher-education institutions have the responsibility to equip their students with the kind of knowled-

ge and skills that will turn them into employable graduates – and not only in the specific field have they studied. This responsibility applies to theology schools and departments, and not only to those of the Roman Catholic confession, who have been committed to the objectives of the European Higher Education Area when the Holy See joined the Bologna Process.

In most participating countries the governments have taken the necessary steps to adjust their higher-education legislation to the objectives of the Bologna process. Also most university rectors and presidents are actively supporting the reforms. Now the responsibility lies with the public authorities, the departments, the professional associations, the professors and the students. I encourage all of you to subscribe to the goal of making Slovenia as a part of the European Higher Education Area an attractive place for students, teachers and researchers from Europe as well as from other parts of the world.

Culture

In the near future, more than ever, more will be expected from our intellectuals: among other things – unbiased judgement, the ability to identify realistic and imaginative solutions, and a single-minded determination to serve the common good.

Today's schools and universities have a heavier civic responsibility than in the past, because we expect them to prepare our young people for the knowledge economy and for a complex world where we are all increasingly interdependent. Developing creativity and fostering the ability to deal with different cultures will certainly give an important contribution to the quality of education and training systems. I am grateful to Slovenian Presidency for embracing the theme of creativity and innovation through education and culture. This week I am going to officially propose to declare 2009 as European Year of creativity and innovation.

Clearly, learning about our own history and culture is the starting point. However, this knowledge should prepare us to understand other societies and cultures. Getting to know one's roots should never become an end in itself, but a means towards higher goals. In other words, it should not be directed towards exclusion and closeness, but towards inclusion and openness.

Open-mindedness and cross-cultural skills have always been important but are becoming more so as Europe seeks to balance its heritage of shared values with the promotion of cultural diversity. We all know that this is a very difficult exercise; but it is worth the

effort, because so much is at stake in the quest for a balance between the self and the other (P. Ricoeur).

And I believe my words will find an attentive audience today. This University has been a meeting point of different cultures since its foundation. You have learned through your own history the importance of respecting the other and – above all – of receiving the other's respect.

You, more than many others, are in a privileged position to contribute to the struggle that is implicit in "*Unity in Diversity*". This remains a brilliant definition of our united Europe (*Uni-versity*).

Attention to Europe's diversity of cultures is more than a simple political call; it is also an explicit action of the EU. E.g., this year we celebrate the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, which we launched in Ljubljana at the beginning of January.

The objectives of the Year are: respect of cultural diversity, promotion of EU citizenship and openness to the world. Instead of commenting and complaining about complexities of multicultural Europe, we need to promote more active intercultural approach – dialogue and respect, we have to build more together. To live together means more than to exist together.

Intercultural dialogue represents a long term objective for the European Union. In fact, intercultural dialogue plays the role of catalyst by promoting integration in many policy areas. Integration = participation, not absorption, not assimilation.

Arts and cultural education could also contribute positively to this project. In fact, arts education encourages creativity, flexible thinking and adaptability, essential elements in our societies. Arts education also helps to build communication skills, to develop intercultural understanding and to establish identity.

Education – from pre-school to post-graduate – is essential to affirm and defend fundamental ethical, civic and social values such as respect for human dignity, citizenship, equality and tolerance.

Education unites! And culture defines our values! Therefore, education and culture represent the road towards Europe as a community of people, community of shared values. This was a dream of our founding fathers, not Europe as a market and trade only. Therefore quality and access to education, cultural awareness and respect for different identity are important for living together. And where knowledge meets, recognize and accept universal human values, a wise, cohesive society is growing. I wish you all, the faculty and students to distinguish between information, knowledge and wisdom. And I wish Slovenia and Europe to proceed from info-society to knowledge one, but to stick always to the top ambition – to form a wise society.

Conclusion

Historia magistra vitae est. 40 years – it is a great symbol of potential human maturity and a new hope. In 1968 Yugoslavia was deeply in communist regime, building unity without freedom. But sunrise was coming. At the same year, thousands of my compatriots from then Czechoslovakia fled through your territory when the Soviet military invaded our country and oppressed Prague Spring reform movement. Less than a generation ago you have started uneasy road towards free, independent state of Slovenia. 10 years ago Slovenia started its negotiations with the EU on accession. Today you preside in our community which is united in freedom. We have got great legacy of peace, freedom, rule of law, common Europe. We have to remember, be grateful for it, and share this legacy with others, namely with the Western Balkan countries, and responsibly shape our future.

I wish this Faculty and the whole University a lot of support, vitality and inspiration. *Vivat, frescat, floreat Academia! Ad multos annos!*