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**Supporting the creation of a knowledge
economy in the Western Balkans: the
Lisbon Strategy and European
instruments**

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Conference of the European Ministers of Education
"Strengthening Education in Europe"

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Dear colleagues, Ministers,

My colleague Benita Ferrero-Waldner has explained in her speech why education, training and research are cornerstones of both the enlargement policy and the external relations policy of the European Union.

Today's event is **another small but important step** along the road which, we hope, will take your countries **into the EU family**. As Ministers responsible for education and training, you bear important responsibilities to make it happen. Teachers, students and educational establishments can and should integrate with the wider European knowledge community before formal membership of the EU. Human networks are a precondition of political and economic integration.

Furthermore, education and training policies are coming more and more to the centre of EU decision making. Why? They are crucial to social and economic development and help build solid institutions - issues of great importance at EU level and, I imagine, of even more crucial importance to you in this stage of your national development.

In the next few minutes, I would like to outline how we cooperate on education and training at the EU level and how, I feel, this can be of interest and practical support to you.

Achieving objectives is a shared responsibility

I should start with the Lisbon strategy. European Heads of state and Government came together in March 2000 to set out a set of shared objectives for our future.

They spelled out what we need to achieve in a range of policy domains if we are to have the kind of fast economic growth, open labour market and socially cohesive societies that we want.

In today's world, Europe can succeed only if it can harness its knowledge. And in this context, education and training issues are paramount.

The Education & Training 2010 work programme is our main instrument for political cooperation and for implementing these goals within the Lisbon agenda.

We have agreed to improve the quality and efficiency of education and training systems and to improve access to these systems and their openness to the wider world.

In addition, we have also agreed a set of tools that help Member States implement their reforms. For example, a peer-learning programme allows Member States to exchange best practices and make tangible progress.

Finally, we have indicators, benchmarks, and specific reporting mechanisms to monitor performance.

The whole system rests on one assumption: success and credibility of our venture at European level depends on how Member States translate the agreed commitments into practice.

Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Turkey are already participating in Education & Training 2010. Latest national reports show that their national policy developments already take into account many aspects of the Lisbon strategy. This is good news.

For example, Croatia, Romania and Turkey have developed national qualification frameworks, proof of practical progress towards the establishment of lifelong-learning systems.

Generally speaking, however, participation in lifelong learning is still very low in the Western Balkan countries and is one of the issues which deserves your further attention and our further European support.

Bologna Process and higher education reforms

You will recall the report on progress in quality assurance, two-cycle degree system, and recognition which was prepared for the Bergen Conference last year.

It showed very encouraging signs from the Western Balkans. Progress, for example, in creating the two cycles, in quality assurance systems and particularly in recognition of qualifications, where most countries have ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention and Albania and Montenegro are doing very well in terms of implementing ECTS.

You can draw on the input provided by the Bologna process, but your reform effort has to go beyond curricular reforms. Looking forward, I suggest you address issues such as funding, governance, links with business - issues which we have been discussing a lot within the Union of late.

National authorities should make sure that the legal framework gives universities the degree of autonomy and accountability they need to function best. This cannot be done so long as universities are legally split into their constituent faculties.

National authorities should also develop diversified models of funding - including private support. Higher education institutions, on the other hand, need to develop a sense of institutional unity and identity as a prerequisite for tackling their challenges. For example, by developing more professional forms of internal governance.

The European Union, both collectively and, I am sure, through individual Member States, can and will assist you in any way possible; however, both the challenge and the ultimate success belong to you and to your people.

Tools for policy implementation

So much for the policy exchange framework. There is also a framework for EU funding in support of the shared objectives and their implementation.

You are already active in this framework. Cooperation with Western Balkan countries in education and research has been significant in recent years, with a substantial Commission contribution provided under several programmes.

Tempus and Erasmus Mundus

The Tempus programme is perhaps the cornerstone of this cooperation .

Tempus has a long history of assisting Partner Countries to reform and strengthen their higher-education systems and to build institutional infrastructure. It also facilitates dialogue between institutions and people, notably by supporting exchanges of best practices and mobility. All in all, between 2000 and 2006, Tempus III will have committed about €110 million on more than 300 projects and 550 individual mobility grants in the Western Balkans.

We are committed to extending Tempus beyond 2006 with a focus on institution - based university cooperation and mobility.

As to the Erasmus Mundus programme, the European Commission has made available a total of 17 scholarships to students and scholars from the Western Balkans so far.

Participation of universities from the Western Balkans in the Erasmus actions to promote institutional cooperation has been relatively weak. Your universities should be more active to raise awareness about the opportunities offered by this programme.

Youth

As far as non-formal education is concerned, the YOUTH Programme promotes intercultural dialogue, tolerance and social inclusion among young people. The programme also strengthens the work of youth NGOs at international level and aims to develop civil society.

I hope you share my high estimation of the value of these actions. I cannot overestimate how much they can help social and political development. Every Euro spent to spread the ideas of civic participation and the value of a united Europe to civil society - and especially to young people - brings a huge return. Perhaps this return is not immediately visible, but if we are serious about our process of integration in the long-term, it is invaluable.

Organisations and young people from the Western Balkans are already participating in most of the activities supported through the YOUTH programme since its start in 2000. They do so with the support of the SALTO Resource Centre for South East Europe, which is funded by the European Commission and based in Ljubljana.

Between 2003 and 2004, 246 projects were funded, involving around 2,200 participants from the region and 2,800 participants from the European Union. This represents an annual increase of over 100% with respect to the preceding three years.

This is my outline of the situation so far. Now I would like to turn to what lies ahead in the next months and years.

The Commission is working on a new set of orientations for the cooperation with the Western Balkans for the period 2006-2010.

Although this is still work in progress and questions remain about how exactly this will be done, we are determined to provide continued support and opportunities for the mobility of students, teachers, and young people.

Our recent Communication "The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: Consolidating stability and raising prosperity" suggests practical steps over the period 2007-2013.

Increasing mobility

In the framework of preparing the new financial instrument—the instrument for pre-accession which will start in 2007—the Commission is currently reviewing its actions under Tempus and Erasmus Mundus, with a view to **increasing** the opportunities for mobility of undergraduate and graduate students.

For the mid-term period starting in 2007, the Commission is committed to proposing a new scholarship scheme for undergraduate students.

The details are currently being examined. However, as early as 2006, the Commission is willing to implement measures that will increase co-operation and mobility. As a first step, a special Western-Balkan "window" will be made available in 2006 within Erasmus Mundus. This will allow up to 100 students from the region to take postgraduate studies in the EU.

Also as from this year, youth organisations based in South East Europe are not only partners in EU projects, but they can become project coordinators, directly submitting pilot projects under the framework of the Youth Programme.

16 projects have been selected so far, which will involve around 176 participants from the region and 216 participants from the European Union, EEA, and Candidate countries.

In this regard, a number of practical hurdles have been identified: mobility obstacles, such as visa, residence permit and difficulties with bank transfers. Cooperation with relevant stakeholders and decision makers is needed to overcome these barriers; we would be grateful for any support the Ministers might be able to provide.

Civil Society Dialogue with Western Balkan countries and Turkey

The Commission has furthermore proposed to extend to all Western Balkan countries the civil society dialogue which was recently launched with the candidate countries.

This is part of our efforts to improve mutual knowledge, understanding and intercultural dialogue between our societies, and to prepare future enlargement.

Programmes such as Tempus, Erasmus Mundus and Youth, or the integrated lifelong learning programme have a strong potential to contribute to this dialogue.

In addition, the Commission considers it particularly important to promote dialogue between Western Balkan societies themselves. A special effort should be made to encourage civil-society development in each country and a culture of civil-society consultation.

I believe education ministers have special responsibility to carry this initiative forward.

Internal or external programmes?

Before finishing, one issue I would like to bring to the table is whether the participation in internal EU programmes or external programmes aimed at countries outside the Union.

Many of the countries represented around this table have expressed interest in participating in our internal Integrated Lifelong Learning programme. I need to make it clear: joining our internal programmes means foregoing access to our external ones.

I would like to **sound both words of encouragement and of caution on this issue.**

Encouragement, because the Commission is ready to assist those who intend to join to strengthen their administrative capacity and to prepare for a transfer of management responsibilities from the Commission to national agencies.

Caution, because joining our internal programmes is a long and difficult process. Our internal programmes are designed around the needs of Member States. They promote projects in which institutions, organisations and enterprises from several countries work together in specific areas. They address issues of European interest and create an added value for the European Union as such. It is difficult to cover the specific needs of new participating countries under such programmes.

In contrast, our external programmes are designed to support the development of education and training systems in partner countries.

They are tailored to support structural reforms. So, in many ways, they are more likely to meet the needs of countries that are at different stages on the road towards membership.

I am sure that an exchange of views on the pros and cons of these options will be interesting to both sides. You have to answer for yourselves the question: which sort of participation is right for your country? Either way, we will help you.

Conclusion

Almost three years have passed since the Thessaloniki summit; since then, a lot has been done to stabilise the Western Balkans and to bring the region closer to the Union.

Cooperation in education, training and youth policies has played no small part in this. I have pointed out the support the EU can provide in these domains, and I can assure you that we will not waver in our commitment in the future.

However - if I may turn directly to you, the Ministers of the Western Balkan countries - it is clearly for you and no one else to decide how best to modernise your education systems and how to bring them towards the European standard.

Learning touches people directly. There is nothing like a school, a university, a workshop or a common project prepared by young people to bring people together, to share views and beliefs, to create a sense of belonging together.

This is why I think the policies I am responsible for can help make integration happen faster and better, not just between politicians and decision makers but between citizens as well.

Thank you.