

Interview with Nikolaus van der Pas, Director-General for Education and Culture: „The European Research Education Area“

In 1999, Ministries from 29 European countries signed the “Bologna Declaration” on the creation of a European Higher Education Area by the end of the decade. The follow-up conference in Berlin in 2003 will be an important step in the realisation of this ambitious goal. The European Commission supports measures to promote the mobility of students and teachers, the European dimension of higher education and the employability of graduates through improved degrees. Higher education institutions benefit from programmes like SOCRATES (mobility of students), TEMPUS (higher education co-operation with the Balkans and the New Independent States) and LEONARDO DA VINCI (vocational training). The Sixth Framework Programme for Research, adopted on 3 June 2002, is intended to counteract the fragmentation of the European research area. Its budget of approx. €1.6 billion will in particular help to promote the mobility of (young) researchers.

kowi-aktuell asked Mr. Nikolaus van der Pas, Director-General for Education and Culture at the European Commission, about the concrete measures it is taking for the creation of a European Area for Higher Education and Research as well as about co-operation between his Directorate-General and that for Research.

kowi-aktuell: In the context of a “Europe of knowledge” an internal Working Group was set up at the end of 2001 by the Directorates-General for Education and Culture and for Research. One of the results of the Working Group was a priority list of joint activities, presented to you and your colleague, Mr. Mitsos, in May 2002. On this basis where do you see future possibilities to use potentials for co-operation and synergy between higher education and research at the level of the Commission?

Van der Pas: I see several concrete possibilities for co-operation and synergy effects. For example, the thematic networks that exist both in education and in research could carry out joint projects in the field of quality assurance and in university-industry relations. They should mutually use their respective contacts to spread and implement results and to promote science within society. Also in the field of mobility and during the doctoral phase, co-operation would be desirable.

kowi-aktuell: During a discussion with University Presidents of the “Nordverbund” on 27 May 2002, you referred to the necessity “that the question on degrees within the European Union must disappear”. Could you please explain that point for our readers?

Van der Pas: Degrees will continue to exist but they must become more readable and compatible, just as stipulated in the Bologna Declaration. Differences will continue to exist, fortunately, but decisions on recognition will become far easier once we have agreed on a common language, both with regards to structure (two/three cycles system) or transparency (Diploma Supplement, ECTS) and also on content. With regard to the debate on content, the Commission is supporting Professor Working Groups (the Tuning project) who are trying to describe in a few pages the so-called “competences”: What should a “Bachelor” or “Master” know in theory and what should be his practical qualifications (knowledge and skills)? Lists of competences should serve as reference points and thereby increase transparency and make recognition easier. They should leave room for innovation and not impose any uniformity.

However, I do not want to give the wrong impression that this growing convergence must lead to a recognition framework decreed at European level. Such a development would go against reality and the principle of subsidiarity. Nevertheless I do hope that we will reach a general and mutual acceptance of diplomas so that each citizen in the EU, as with currencies and driving licences, no longer has to wonder whether his degree is accepted another Member State. The way to achieve this objective must be through practical and trusted co-operation between higher education institutions and the authorities responsible for quality assurance. In simple terms, the principle should be: if a diploma is recognised in one state, it should also be valid in another.

kowi-aktuell: In this context, what importance do you attach to a European Master’s degree? What makes a European qualification competitive in an international context? What incentives does the Commission provide for higher education institutions in the Member States to develop feasible models for such degrees?

Van der Pas: The European Commission would like universities in Europe, in the framework of mutual co-operation and trust that I have just mentioned, to pool their resources and to offer joint Masters programmes of a higher quality. Such European Master courses - Centres of Excellence - would heighten the profile and attractiveness of European higher education for European students - but also for students and lecturers from other continents - and help Europe to become the No. 1 address world-wide for high-level learning.

First of all, we have to be clear about what “European” means: how many partners, what kind of integration of course content, what recognition agreements? The Commission is currently supporting a collection of data to examine ongoing practices and identify a typology and a model, or even several models. The second step will be a small pilot project (2002-2003) to assess good practice in ten different and existing joint Master programmes and to see how such Master programmes can be developed in the future. Based on the results of both the data collected and the pilot project, I am considering a third step: the systematic support of a growing number of European Master programmes, 50, 100, 150 etc., in the coming years, starting maybe already in 2003-2004. We will promote them through the SOCRATES programme and possibly through new Commission initiatives, to encourage students in other parts of the world to study here and to come to appreciate the outstanding qualities of European higher education.

kowi-aktuell: Do you see concrete ways of linking the mobility measures for students on the one hand and for researchers on the other, either within the Marie Curie programme or through European science careers?

Van der Pas: Together with our colleagues from the Research department we are currently looking into the possibilities for such concrete links and therefore it is too early to give you a definite answer. One of the central issues is the fact that higher education programmes focus on teaching and research programmes on research – whereas we all know from practical experience that most professors do both during their stay abroad. Instead of hiding this good mixture of teaching and research, we should perhaps emphasise and support it. We should also cooperate to improve information and advice as well as to remove the obstacles which obstruct mobility, e.g. in the fields of social security, visa regulations and career planning.

kowi-aktuell: Are networks among national programmes for young academics already established? What value do you attach to the Directorate-General for Research’s proposal for an ERA-NET scheme to support the co-operation of national research organisations?

Van der Pas: In education we have a long tradition of co-operation with national and regional bodies. National agencies are managing the larger part of the programme budgets on behalf of the Commission. Many of them look for and receive additional funding from national, regional and private sources. This kind of co-operation should be enlarged and deepened. For this reason I am looking forward to seeing how the ERA-NET initiative will bring about synergy effects between national, regional and European research activities.

kowi-aktuell: What do you consider to be the most important agreements that should be reached at the Berlin Conference in 2003?

Van der Pas: I think quality is at the heart of the Bologna process and the Berlin Conference should promote initiatives that will spread quality assurance and evaluation, making them more widely used and more coherent. Quality today is no longer simply assessed according to national or regional standards, not even European standards, but within global competition. Researchers know this well and it is in particular true for universities. The forming of networks and the mutual recognition of national quality assurance systems are preferred instruments but maybe they lack a European structure that would integrate these national guarantees of quality. This year, the European Commission will support a first series of evaluations of study programmes that apply agreed criteria. In addition the Commission will assist universities in introducing mechanisms for internal quality assurance in teaching and research. Based on this and other experiences the Commission will present its ideas at the Berlin Conference. If we fail to achieve rapid progress on the quality front, American accreditation agencies and private institutions will be the only points of reference in this field.

I also think - and this will especially interest your readers - that the Bologna process should be extended to doctoral studies. The Commission is presently gathering data on the doctoral phase and is seriously considering joint action in education and research to encourage international co-operation in doctoral studies. The Bologna Follow-Up Group is planning to recommend such a step to the Ministers and I hope that "Berlin" will agree to that.

In the decision of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 that it was necessary for the European Union to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economic area in the world, the Europeans have set themselves a very challenging goal. The education and research sector should accept this challenge. The Commission will do everything in its power to support the political decision-makers and stakeholders in this field to make the "Europe of knowledge" a reality.

kowi-aktuell: Thank you very much for answering these questions!