

Androulla VASSILIOU

Member of the European Commission responsible for Education,
Culture, Multilingualism and Youth

Education policies in the crisis: a new European integration motor?

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

College of Europe of Natolin (Poland), 26 September 2011

Dear Rector Demaret,
Dear Vice Rector Ośniecka-Tamecka,
Dear Mr Saryusz-Wolski,
Ladies and gentlemen, dear students

It is a real pleasure to be here with you today. The College of Europe has indeed a special place in Europe's educational landscape. From 1948 and the Hague Congress where the idea of the College of Europe emerged, the objective was to create an institution where university graduates from different countries could study and live together.

More than 65 years later, the college has expanded, welcoming every year around 400 students over two campuses and giving the opportunity to its students to experience Europe. A true 'College community' is active, [up even to my cabinet since two of my collaborators are 'ancient' from the College].

Jean Monnet was saying that 'Europe is a state of mind', and I truly believe that the 'College spirit', as I understand it is often referred to, is indeed a powerful illustration of this necessary state of mind.

To be in Natolin today makes this occasion all the more significant. The creation of this campus was decided only a few years after the watershed events of 1989, sending a strong signal that the re-unification of Europe was imminent. Now, less than 20 years after that decision, the country hosting this campus is also the one that holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union. I believe we should all pay homage to the "true Europeans" who created Natolin College, well before the aspirations of membership of the new democracies had been recognised by the Union.

This year's "promotion" at the College of Europe is named after Marie Skłodowska-Curie. I understand that President Barroso will officially open your academic year in a couple of days. I believe it is particularly fitting to commemorate Marie Curie here in Natolin, only a few kilometres from the city where she was born, Warsaw.

This morning, I participated at a conference with the Polish presidency to pay tribute to her impressive scientific achievements: the first woman to win a Nobel Prize and also the first person to win a second one in another discipline. Taking her as an example, we created 15 years ago a programme to support the mobility and the excellence of our European Researchers. The Marie Curie Actions is a well-known and successful programme with more than 50 000 researchers supported since its creation.

Marie Curie's example is truly inspiring, especially for all of us who believe in the European project. And from her example, I would like to explain what I believe the role of Education and culture in the European integration is.

One might question the relevance of discussing education and culture – always long term projects – under the current circumstances when most people expect or demand immediate remedies for acute problems and great challenges affecting us all: The economic crisis, the economic governance, the role and the weight of Europe in the world and a renewed partnership with our Southern Mediterranean and eastern neighbours – and I know that the neighbourhood policy is at the heart of the activities here on the Natolin Campus.

Europe, as an economic then a political area, has been described as a model of regional functional integration. But, as eloquently stated by the German philosopher, Heinz Wismann, we need now an additional form of integration through culture and education. Jean Monnet himself said that the European project can only succeed if

Governments of the Member states give all young people the tools through education to exploit fully their potentials.

Today's playing field is the global knowledge economy, and the countries with the best-educated or skilled workforce will be the most competitive. Regrettably, Europe no longer leads the race. We have watched as other countries and other regions have bypassed us in terms of excellence, in the basic skills of their young people, in the number of their university graduates and in the quality of their universities.

If we want to be among the protagonists of the 21st century economy, Europe must make the leap to becoming a truly knowledge-based society.

This is a matter of serious concern. In the future there will be more jobs for the highly skilled, and fewer for those less-skilled. The prospects are indeed quite stark: today in Europe about 80 million people have low or basic skills. By 2020, 16 million more jobs will require high qualifications, while the demand for low skills will have dropped by 12 million jobs.

Because of the economic crisis, we have lost almost a decade of growth. Young people, in particular, have felt the pain, with youth unemployment now over 20%. This is an unsustainable situation from the economic, social and human standpoints.

Even before the crisis, Europe needed to undertake serious reforms. More than ever now, in the current economic downturn and fiscal constraints, we need to show that we can modernise Europe's education systems through targeted reforms.

In my view, we can remain competitive, and retain our social model, provided we invest in people and their skills; in their capacity to innovate, to think up new solutions, to create new concepts and new projects.

One could wonder what the role of the EU is, in an area where most of the competences remain within the hands of the Member States. I strongly believe that in education like in other great challenges such as the economic integration or the environmental sustainability, Europe is neither a choice nor an option, it is a necessity. We need more Europe to succeed and the Member States will make more progress together than alone. And Education could very well be the next motor of European integration.

This is not by chance that the Europe 2020 strategy places Education at the centre of the political priorities through a dual education target: to raise higher education attainment to 40% and to reduce early school leaving to 10%. Member States have set their own national targets to achieve these European averages. This means they have taken ownership, which is critical to the strategy's success.

But this time, we went one step further towards European integration. To the difference of the Lisbon strategy, we have now instruments to monitor the actions of the Member States, also in a field of national competences such as education policies. Fully integrated to the European semester governance, we will issue every year specific country recommendations on different structural and macroeconomic issues, including education. Last July, we addressed such recommendations in Education to 17 of our Member States.

Moreover, if within the broad Europe 2020 framework, the focus on public deficits is strong, it is clearly stated in the first annual growth survey for 2011 that Member States should nevertheless give priority to investment in growth-enhancing areas. When the US is investing 2.7% of its GDP in Education, Europe is lagging behind with merely 1.3% of GDP.

In addition to these evolutions towards a true European education policy, there are areas where the EU has clearly an added value and act. I have presented last week an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's Higher education systems. This agenda gives precise recommendations to Member States in order to raise the

quantity and the quality of tertiary graduates, while placing Higher education institutions at the heart of the innovation process and ensuring a sound financing of Education.

This agenda is broad and touches on many aspects. However, I would like to highlight three of my priorities lines; illustration of what the EU can do on Higher education.

First, I believe it is high time to create a true single area for Higher Education, where all the burdens to mobility are removed and a real recognition of diplomas is put in place. The Bologna process and the European Credit Transfer System credit which I am sure you all know have been very instrumental, but I believe we need to continue on that path and enhance this system.

Second, I intend to strengthen significantly the support to Mobility. I would hope that most of you know about Erasmus. It is certainly one of the most – if not the most-successful programme of the EU. And, as you may have noted, the Commission in its proposal of June for the EU budget from 2014-2020, has proposed an impressive increase – 73% - in the programme funding to support good education including mobility programmes. I am confident that Member States and the European Parliament will support us in this direction. I will also propose to create an Erasmus master mobility scheme, in order to support the mobility of students willing to do a full master degree in another Member State. We will in that perspective set up, together with the European Investment Bank, a system of European guarantees for student loans dedicated to mobility.

Finally, I want to develop effective transparency tools on the quality of higher institutions in Europe and beyond. Everyone knows about the Shanghai ranking or the Times ranking. However, these rankings tend to focus almost exclusively on the research performance of higher education institutions, while neglecting other factors such as employability of their graduates, quality of teaching, innovation, internationalisation. I am therefore promoting the creation of a multi-dimensional ranking system which will help students to make informed choices when it comes to orientation of their studies.

[Conclusion]

Dear students,

The European project is today at stake. As is the case for many other public goods, it suffers from what the economists call the tragedy of the commons. Too many people take it for granted, and assume that somebody else will look after it.

Today, Europe is facing difficult and serious crises, economic, political and of identity. The European idea itself is put into question by some, more and more citizens are in doubt and we see a worrying increase of nationalist parties all across Europe.

Focusing on a specific aspect of European integration such as education, I tried to bring a more optimistic vision of what I believe the European Union is and can be.

We are certainly living now an historical moment, a turning point of the European integration. For the current generation of Europeans, including yours, I believe, as President Barroso said it recently, that what we need is a "moment fédérateur".

I would like here again to recall Jean Monnet who said that: "people accept changes only in the necessity and they see the necessity only in the crisis". These words call on us all to build a stronger Europe.

The mission of the EU is to unite people: as graduates of the College of Europe you will become many ambassadors of our Union. You are the next generation of Europeans, and we count on your dynamism and understanding of the European idea, its origins and the values attached to it so you can transmit them, and continue to build this project in the spirit of its founding fathers.

Thank you