

**Ministry of Education, Culture and  
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**Reference**  
HO&S/BL/285101

Date 28 maart 2011  
Subject Consultation on Modernisation of Higher Education

Dear Ms. Vassiliou,

In January, you initiated a consultation on the modernisation of higher education in Europe. This in view of the forthcoming communication on this subject, which is to be presented in September.

Let me first of all express my appreciation for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on an issue that is so important to the EU, its Member States, and, of course, to students and institutions of higher education.

In the past few months, the strategic EU policy orientations for the next decade have been defined. The Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth has been adopted by the European Council and its flagship initiatives have been presented by the Commission. Education is at the heart of this strategy with higher education cited as one of its main goals. Earlier, in 2009, the 2020 vision for the Bologna process was adopted in Leuven. We should now use the momentum that has been created and put modernisation of higher education high on our political agendas. At the same time, discussions on the next Financial Framework will start shortly, with proposals for a new framework expected in June and those for the various programmes in December.

Below, I will succinctly describe my thoughts on the modernisation of higher education, using the questions that you have put forward as points of departure.

*1. Today's key challenges for higher education systems*

Over the past few years, several EU Member States have seen a large increase in the number of students entering higher education and it is widely predicted that, in the Netherlands, this trend will continue until at least 2020. In June 2010, the European Council set an EU-wide target which stipulates that at least 40% of the 25-34 year olds should have a tertiary qualification in 2020. This rapid influx of new students is a positive development since it is likely that tomorrow's labour market will have an increased demand for highly-educated people. At the same time, however, institutions of higher education are confronted with the difficult task of absorbing these new students while aiming to improve the quality of their programmes. Tangential to this is the need to keep the teaching profession attractive in order to maintain a sufficient number of highly-qualified staff against

the background of an ageing population. It is also important to prevent this trend from having adverse effects on the research component of higher education institutions, not in the least because this could weaken the knowledge triangle.

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As a result of the recent financial crisis, however, many EU Member States have been forced to introduce budget cuts, often also on education. This presents the institutions of higher education with a formidable challenge with regard to their ambitions, foremost among which is improving the quality of higher education. Much discussion will be needed to solve this quandary. How, for instance, does it relate to policies aimed at attracting new target groups, such as Life Long Learning policy. The further development of private funding opportunities for institutions of higher education might offer a solution here. As already pointed out in the 2006 communication on modernising higher education, institutions in Europe frequently experience difficulties in attracting private funding. Taking into account our continued commitment to high-quality research and education and the improvement of our international competitiveness, it is important that all possibilities for attracting private funding for our institutions of higher education, both at the national and European levels, are fully used. This, of course, without affecting academic integrity.

Globalisation is another major challenge, not just for the higher education system, but for our knowledge economies as a whole. In order to improve our international competitiveness, we have to improve the connections within the knowledge triangle. Our education systems should equip graduates with a broad set of skills with which they can easily adapt to rapidly changing environments. As such, it is imperative that the higher education system becomes more closely connected to the labour market and the research arena, and vice versa. How can our higher education systems adapt to become more closely aligned with our economic strengths and contribute more towards the great societal challenges such as those outlined in the Europe 2020 strategy? How do we achieve a better match between higher education and the competences and skills that are demanded by the labour market? How do we align national and European priorities in such a way as to avoid duplication and generate more spillover effects?

Another challenge is the introduction of tertiary short-cycle education. In The Netherlands, the Associate Degree fills an important gap in the higher education system. It is an attractive proposition for new target groups and meets a need of students, especially those coming from VET, businesses (including SMEs) and civil society. Challenging questions remain, however, about such issues as the desirable volume of short-cycle education and its positioning in relation to other parts of the education system.

In The Netherlands, debate on the future of the Dutch higher education system is dominated by the 2010 report on this topic by the independent Veerman committee. The Dutch government has committed itself to implementing the

report's central recommendations, which call for a strong boost of the quality and diversity of Dutch higher education.<sup>1</sup>

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## *2. Examples of successful European higher education initiatives and reforms*

In recent years, a number of important European initiatives have been undertaken which have successfully contributed to higher education reform.

Both the U-map project, in which a European classification of higher education institutions has been developed, and the U-Multirank project, which aims at developing a multi-dimensional global university ranking, are essential initiatives for providing more finely tuned transparency instruments.

The European Qualifications Framework which helps to relate the multitude of national qualifications systems to a single European reference framework will greatly improve comparability of educational attainment levels for European students within the EU, and could also have a positive effect on mobility. The implementation of the reforms in the Bologna Process has similarly helped to promote mobility and to make the diverse national higher education systems more closely aligned and more mutually intelligible.

Finally, the open method of coordination has much contributed to European cooperation and mutual policy learning in this area.

## *3. Areas that leave room for improvement*

Although substantial progress has been made in recent years, there is still much room for improvement.

It is of vital importance that continued support is given to the construction of transparency instruments, as they can be greatly beneficial to institutions in helping them find their natural partners at a European level. Since instruments such as U-Map derive much of their potential from the number of countries and institutions that participate, I believe rolling out U-Map to all Member States would be desirable. It is also important to continue developing instruments such as U-Map and U-Multirank and ensure that they can count on broad based support. For these projects to succeed, they must be able to faithfully map the diversity of European higher education. As such, it is imperative that we develop indicators that are substantially different from those which are used in current rankings. We have to keep working on creating indicators which include other aspects of the knowledge triangle, such as impact of research and quality of education. The establishment of a feasible multi-dimensional university ranking is essential. Transparency, also of performance, will enable institutions to demonstrate that they are valued for excelling at their specific fields of expertise without necessarily having to conduct groundbreaking research. I believe this

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<sup>1</sup> See for the report and the Dutch government's response: <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/bestanden/documenten-en-publicaties/kamerstukken/2011/02/07/kabinetsreactie-rapport-commissie-veerman/kabinetsreactie-rapport-commissie-veerman.pdf>

might enable authorities to make more informed decisions about the provision of financial incentives.

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Multi-dimensional rankings are also instrumental to improving the connections between actors within the knowledge triangle. Current rankings are primarily based on research output, such as numbers of peer-reviewed, scientific publications and fail to include indicators for such important aspects as the quality of education and dissemination and the application of scientific and technological knowledge (valorisation). As a result, they do not offer institutions of higher education any incentives for improving their education levels or their dissemination activities and cooperation with the business world. Recent American research has shown that researchers who temporarily leave their universities to engage in entrepreneurial activities have a structurally lower publication rate upon their return to research. As a result, then, of the rather limited focus of the current ranking system, improving the link between the research and business arenas might have detrimental effects on other aspects of the knowledge triangle. This, of course, is undesirable.

Additionally, it is necessary to create more diversity within the system, between institutions, and with regard to types of educational and research programmes so that they are more closely aligned with the needs of actors outside the higher education system. Of course, this should not be at the expense of academic integrity and does not preclude continued commitment to excellence and ground-breaking research.

#### *4. Priorities for a new EU strategy on higher education modernisation and actions to be taken at EU level*

What initiatives could be taken at the European level to facilitate the completion of a well-functioning European Higher Education Area? And how could this be done in such a way that the principle of subsidiarity and the autonomy of the institutions of higher education are fully respected? I believe, without being exhaustive, that European cooperation could be especially useful in the following areas:

- (a) updating and consolidating European initiatives
- (b) addressing all issues linked to mobility
- (c) recognition of qualifications and credits
- (d) improving the functioning of the knowledge triangle
- (e) positioning our universities in the world

I will elaborate on these issues below.

A. Update and Consolidate. The past decade has seen fundamental changes in higher education and the context in which higher education institutions operate. Notably, the Bologna process with the introduction of the Bachelor/Master-structure has had a major impact although differences between participating countries remain in practical interpretation of the reforms and in quality assurance and accreditation. Other developments are the increasing importance of international rankings, the proliferation of joint degree programmes and offshore education, and the further development of transparency tools such as EQF.

Now that our systems for higher education become more and more interrelated, the case for closer European cooperation will only become stronger over the next decade. New European policy initiatives in the area of higher education should take the present reality into account and seek to consolidate developments and initiatives already taken.

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**B. Mobility.** In the context of the globalisation of our economies, all young people should have the opportunity of a learning experience abroad. At the same time, we are facing new challenges linked to mobility, such as designing portability measures that are both in conformity with EU law and affordable for the home state. My observation is that there is a lot of good will among Member States to take mobility a step further, but that additional policies and measures do not materialise because of fear for either infringement procedures or excessive costs. I call on your services to think along with Member States on how to practically approach this dilemma.

Also, we should get a clearer picture of the specific barriers and needs linked to degree mobility as seen from the perspective of the students. Additionally, we need to address unbalanced mobility, which creates financial burdens in receiving states and may cause brain-drain effects in sending states. It would be desirable to investigate the current situation and to estimate the costs and benefits of mobility, since good data is currently lacking. It is equally important to keep improving staff mobility, since internationally experienced staff can improve the quality of education. Finally, we should emphasize the importance of mobility of researchers in order to realise the overall strategic objective to make Europe more attractive for researchers.

**C. Recognition.** Students rightly want to know if ECTS-credits obtained abroad are taken into account by their home universities. They also want to know what their qualifications are worth, especially on the labour market. Therefore recognition continues to be a key issue where the EU can play a constructive role. For the access to and exercise of regulated professions, the Directive on Professional Qualifications is a valuable tool, guaranteeing professionals legal certainty and rights. The current evaluation of the directive is an important opportunity to seek further improvement of the procedures for professionals, but also to start a discussion on how to limit the number of regulated professions (currently more than 800) to the professions where there is a real concern of general interest. Finally, academic recognition, for which the Lisbon Recognition Convention applies, deserves attention of the EU.

**D. Knowledge Triangle.** In order to stimulate a knowledge triangle of (higher) education, research and innovation The European Institute for Innovation and Technology (EIT) has been set up. I am looking forward to the first Strategic Innovation Agenda which the EIT is currently working on. I believe it is important that the European modernisation agenda, which will be presented in September, is closely aligned to the EIT's strategic agenda. Furthermore, the knowledge triangle perspective should be one of the guiding principles of the next generation of programmes, so that (higher) education is not left out whenever research and innovation are addressed, and vice versa.

**E. Position in the World.** If our ambition is to create more world-class universities, an outward-looking perspective is crucial. We should reach out to partners in third

countries and create platforms and partnerships wherever there is a need or a niche, thus positioning our universities and using the EU's economies of scale. In my view, the new institutional framework in the area of EU external policy that was created by the Treaty of Lisbon could be instrumental to this ambition. It would be interesting to further explore possibilities for integrating the European education and research agenda into the EU's external policies and for facilitating international cooperation in the areas of education and research through the extensive network of EU representations all over the world.

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#### *5. Working methods and programmes*

Apart from defining our common agenda, it is important to look into our working methods. First of all, we have the Open Method of Cooperation (OMC) as used under the Strategic Framework ET2020. I put a high value on mutual policy learning and other activities that add to our knowledge base for education policy, such as EU-wide research, so that we better understand what works and why. We could make more and better use of the OMC, provided that it is used to address well-defined needs of Member States and institutions for higher education.

Also, the future EU programme in the area of education and training will be a very important instrument to further our agenda. I refer to my letter on the future of the Life Long Learning programme dated 20 December 2010 in which I set out a number of key points that I believe could shape a new and ambitious programme in the area of education and training, such as putting more emphasis on incentives for cooperation at institutional level (e.g. promoting the setting up of joint degree programmes), and allowing for more flexibility when it comes to different forms of mobility (including diploma mobility), especially with regard to stimulating excellence. The current Erasmus Mundus programme already works along these lines and therefore deserves continuation. Additionally, in order to reduce administrative burdens, accounting principles and methods for EU-subsidies should be based on a high trust approach and a 'single information, single audit' system.

Finally, we should make full use of the fact that education is at the heart of the Europe 2020 strategy. In terms of governance, this means that progress towards our goals is now monitored as part of the "European semester". One of the decisions the European Council took in this context was to hold regular thematic discussions on issues relevant to the success of the strategy. To raise the political profile of the debate on modernisation, I would suggest that -at an appropriate moment- a thematic discussion on this issue be envisaged in the European Council.

Let me end by expressing the hope that these thoughts may contribute to the work undertaken by your services in drawing up the communication. Of course, I would be more than happy to discuss these issues in more depth with you.

Yours sincerely,

State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science

Halbe Zijlstra