TAKING STOCK OF EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY COOPERATION :
A NEW POINT OF DEPARTURE

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The contribution of higher education"

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Mr. Marcelino Oreja, has asked me to convey his warmest greetings to you all, and his sincere best wishes to the European Institute of Education and Social Policy on its 10th anniversary. His patronage of this symposium attests to the importance he attaches both to its results and to the fulfilment of the Institute's objectives.

If we want to promote European university cooperation we must first know something about education systems and policies in Europe, particularly in the field of higher education and research. This is why the Council of Europe has for many years analysed the development of tertiary education in Europe. The present situation is marked by the following features :

- first, the percentage of students going on to higher education has continued to grow relentlessly, confirming the trend of the 1960s and 70s. Gone are the days when the universities provided for the qualification of an élite – they are now in the mass education business. Viewed in terms of the legitimate goal of equal opportunities this is a welcome development. It means more education for more people.

But the process of democratisation has inevitably devalued the coinage of higher education. The more university degrees there are, all things being equal, the less they will be worth on the job market. The inevitable result is that more and more students now seek to increase their chances by staying on for a postgraduate degree. And then what ? We have all heard stories about the number of Ph.D.'s driving taxis in New York.

- the second point is that this process has of course been encouraged by
conditions on the supply side of the job market. Youth unemployment has been
running at twice the overall rate, reaching as high as 40% in some European
countries. What better or more convenient solution than to stay in education,
supported by parents or governments which are desperate to keep them out of
the dole queues ? Increasingly, our higher education institutions are
becoming parking lots for those who would otherwise be gainfully employed.

- the third point is that this higher education explosion has affected what
might be called the productivity of higher education. Not only have standards
been lowered but drop-out rates have increased : drop-outs not only from
higher education altogether but, more strikingly, in the form of switching
between subjects of study, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

- fourthly, we have seen a proliferation of specialist institutions in higher
education : advanced institutes of journalism, of business studies, of inter-
national relations, of microbiology, etc. This is partly a response to the
devaluation of higher education, partly a response to unemployment and to the
special needs of specific corporations : corporations both in the sense of a
professional association and in the American sense of business firm : witness
IBM's university in Belgium, whose director is here today. This phenomenon is
matched by a proliferation of specialised research centres. In other words,
the universities no longer monopolise the functions of teaching or research.
They must learn to live with research centres and specialist schools, found-
ations and information systems, which are themselves creators and disseminators
of ideas, and providers of training.

- finally, there is the vexed question of finance : in most cases the unfavourable
economic climate has meant smaller appropriations for higher education.

    All this leads me to ask whether we should not be reconsidering higher
education in the light of experience with generally open admissions policies.
How far do we want this process to go ? Is it open-ended ?

    In its analysis of the situation of higher education in Europe, the Council
of Europe has identified various reforms introduced in recent years :

first, in response to unemployment, there has been an attempt to align higher education curricula more closely with the needs of the labour market, to make courses more practical and "relevant". The danger here of course is that once particular disciplines or university courses are considered of little use for employment purposes, the prestige of the universities is undermined. Perhaps this problem might be overcome by combining vocational with general courses in the first two years as a preliminary to vocational courses in the third year, as is happening in some countries ;

- second, universities are currently making efforts to reorganise and diversify undergraduate and postgraduate courses ;

- third, there is a trend towards shortening the official and effective duration of university studies ;

- fourth, the number of part-time, mature students is increasing so that universities are putting more emphasis on the provision of permanent education

- fifth, universities have become equipped with the latest communications technology for use in distance and ordinary education ;

- sixth, there has been a marked tendency in all European countries to delay selection within the university system ;

- seventh, many countries are trying to coordinate admissions policies with the financial mechanisms of higher education institutions ;

- finally, university research has been promoted as a factor in technological innovation. Many steps have been taken to establish or improve relations with industry and commerce. The problem here of course is how to safeguard the integrity and independence of the universities.

Many of these reform trends were identified at the Council of Europe's major conference, held in 1983, on higher education and research policies in Europe approaching the year 2000. That conference also debated the European dimension of universities, and the specific role of the Council of Europe.

When we look at European university cooperation and mobility, the record is not exactly encouraging. The legal, financial and administrative barriers are still high. Nevertheless, there has been progress along three lines :

- there has been a certain convergence in the content of university courses;
- academic qualifications are more widely recognised; and
- the mobility of students and staff has increased.

One of the Council of Europe's main objectives has been to encourage European institutions of higher education and research to work together to improve postgraduate curricula. A series of European workshops aims to identif areas where curriculum development is needed and to make recommendations at European level. The Council of Europe also organises what it calls "European Intensive Courses". These cover highly specialised advanced areas of scientif knowledge, often characterised nationally by a shortage of teachers and low student numbers. This European programme for the development of postgraduate training has been highly successful and has contributed, at least on a modest scale, to improving the quality of advanced studies in Europe.

We hope that progress along these lines might lead in due course to imple- mentation of a promising idea recently launched by the Italian Minister of Education, Mrs. Franca Falcucci, and taken up by the Council of Europe, for a "doctorate with a European seal of approval", This would mark an important st towards the goal of a Europe-wide academic community.

When it comes to harmonisation of studies at the undergraduate level, how- ever, we have to admit that early hopes have not been realised.

The Council of Europe achieved early successes in the form of European Conventions, ie. treaties,

- on the Equivalence of Diplomas leading to Admission to Universities (19
- on the Equivalence of periods of university study (1956); and
- on the Academic Recognition of University Qualifications (1959).

But unfortunately the most that can be said for these is that they demon- strated a political will. In practice they came up against a bewildering vari of European university curricula and requirements.

It seems that the only way forward is to develop a European unit/credit system allowing students to complete study "modules" in different countries an to accumulate the number of credits required for a degree.

Breaking down the barriers to mobility of students and staff depends very much on improving the information on opportunities available to them.

The Council of Europe has

- published a handbook on academic study in Europe to complement that produced by the European Commission by describing the situation in non- Council of Europe countries.

- is about to publish a handbook giving practical information for students and researchers on academic conditions in the member countries ;

- has set up a European network of national centres concerned with academic mobility and the equivalence of academic qualifications.

To promote mobility the Council of Europe also :

- coordinates a higher education scholarship scheme, each country offering some ten to twenty scholarships a year for study abroad ;

- has adopted a Recommendation (1984) to governments concerning the situation of foreign students. This encourages students to spend periods of study abroad, one or two years, depending on the course. The Recommendation covers access of foreign students to universities, return and re-integration, information on studies abroad, financing and scholarships, etc

- has adopted a Recommendation (1985) on the mobility of academic staff, encouraging universities to recruit temporary foreign professors and lecturers on conditions which will not be detrimental to their careers.

In seeking to increase university cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe has recognised the importance of the regional dimension. There is no doubt that the regions have a powerful contribution to make towards European unity, and that within the regions, the universities are very influential. The Council of Europe is thus analysing the situation of European university cooperation between regions situated on different sides of national frontiers : in the Pyrenées area, for example, or the upper Rhine, or the Danube region.

I would like now to say something about European cooperation on research, though we must not forget that research and teaching are inseparately linked, in my opinion. University teachers may have a preference for teaching or research but one cannot exist without the other. The universities of course make an important contribution to scientific and technological research. According to OECD statistics (10 December 1984), gross domestic expenditure on research and development in higher education in Europe amounts to between 13 and 30 % of total expenditure on such research and development, depending on the country. This is of fundamental importance.

Strengthening European cooperation in research was one of the main recommendations of the Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Research, held in Paris on 17 September 1984. In particular, the Ministers noted in their Political Declaration that "in research as in many other areas, the fragmentation of efforts carries the risk that Europe may be deprived of its creativity and competitiveness and thus of its potential, at a critical time when scientific and technological developments are accelerating throughout the world".

The Ministers called not only for increased mobility but also for the strengthening of existing networks of scientific and technological cooperation in Europe and, where appropriate, the creation of new networks.

The Council of Europe intends to play its full part, with the other bodies concerned such as the European Community's Commission and the European Science Foundation, in promoting and strengthening such networks. In this connection, my Directorate has initiated contacts with a view to improving what might be called the European research infrastructure. For example, we envisage setting up a European Library Cooperation Network to give support to and facilitate communication between data bases, with agreement on cataloguing rules and exchang formats.

Gradually perhaps, but surely, we can create a "European scientific and technical area" reminiscent of that noble tradition of a European academic community which existed in the heyday of the great Renaissance seats of learning 500 years ago.