

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism

Cultural diversity and higher education

University of Bucharest
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Check against delivery

Distinguished professors,

Authorities,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Students,

What better place than the University of Bucharest to address the issues of cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe?

In this university—founded on the advice of Constantin Cantacuzino, a brilliant scholar and humanist educated at Padua—lectures were delivered in Greek, and then French, Italian and Latin.

I have found lot of positive attitude during number of meetings I had in last two days in Bucharest. **Your country will sign Accession Treaty** next month. As from the signature, your representatives will participate, as an observer, in most of the workings of the Council of the EU and the European parliament in order to watch the interests of Romanian citizens, but also to inform citizens about the developments of the European Union from inside.

As a national of a country that has recently joined the Union, I feel very close to the emotions and hopes that line the road to accession. At the same time, I would like to stress that in the period before the accession, a **close attention**

needs to be paid to fulfilment of all obligations taken in the accession negotiations. Interest of the Commission is not to issue warning letters, but to be sure that the country will enter the Union prepared as much as possible. There is still a **lot to do to complete and accelerate preparations for accession** and to meet the target date of 1 January 2007.

Membership in the European Union has also lot to offer for its citizens, including students and professors. As an example, Romania has been participated in EU education actions such as Comenius and Erasmus for several years now. As to the Erasmus, I wish to stress the growing participation of Romania to the programme. In 2003–2004, just over 3000 Romanian students went abroad and 536 European students studied in Romania. This is respectively an 11,3% and a 51% rise over the previous Academic year.

Universities around the world, and particularly in our multicultural Europe, are the temples of cultural diversity built on two equally strong Pillars:

- they preserve and nurture knowledge and appreciation of one's own culture, roots and identity;
- they stimulate openness and genuine interest for the other cultures in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect.

Our tradition of cultural diversity is not just the combination of distinct communities and peoples who never meet and never speak to each other. It's not either a snapshot of one place at a given time with a number of nationalities, religions and languages.

The concept of **cultural diversity is based on exchange and flow:**

- exchange of people;
- exchange of ideas;
- exchange of cultural goods and services.

To use the vocabulary of contemporary art, **cultural diversity is not a *still life*, it's a *happening*.**

We recognise and value our differences and our identities because it makes our dialogue richer. The European integration process is in itself such a dialogue.

This is why EU enlargement is a wonderful opportunity for all countries and citizens of the EU, far beyond the economic and other benefits it may entail.

Higher Education

Since the adoption of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, Europe's higher education has entered a new phase of reforms.

The goal is to build a coherent, compatible and attractive European Higher Education Area by 2010. This means is a set of convergent reforms in each of the 40 participating countries, including Romania.

The main reasons for higher education reforms are as follows:

- need to achieve more and easier mobility;
- need to ensure fair and effective access of graduates from all EU countries to the European labour market;
- need to enhance the efficiency of higher education systems;
- need to make European higher education more readable and hence more attractive, both to Europeans and non-Europeans.

European universities should address a set of specifically European priorities, such as easy recognition of degrees or qualifications. More and more European students will look for qualifications that are easily recognised in the whole of Europe, especially at postgraduate level.

Romania has made major steps towards the European Higher Education Area by reorganizing the entire higher education system. Starting with the next academic year, your higher education structure will be organised in three cycles (Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral). I welcome and applaud your reform effort.

Reforms are only likely to be successful at universities that value their role in society and have the capacity to react rapidly and flexibly. As you know, we **need to increase private funding of higher education and research centres** in Europe. This will be possible only if students and enterprises can see that what they get in return is worth the effort.

As an example - the EU **invests** only 1,1% of GDP in higher education, compared with 2,3% in the USA. Level of public funding is about the same (1%), the gap is created due to the low levels of private funding in Europe.

The issue of funding takes up special significance in new Member States and acceding countries like Romania. On average, these countries are investing less than the EU average in higher education and research.

A few simple data will help me make this point. As I said earlier, in 2001, the EU average investment in higher education was 1.1% of GDP, in nominal Purchasing Parity (PPS) terms 8600 euro. This figure was 3400 euro in Romania.

Hence, there is a direct link between the need for more funding and the need for more responsive and flexible higher education. National legislations should make things easy in this respect.

We also need to bring European universities back to their position as world leaders. To increase the power of attraction of European universities in the world, we should offer degrees which only Europe can offer—like the Erasmus Mundus master programmes launched last year.

Last month, the Commission selected the new Erasmus Mundus master's courses, involving 69 European universities. These add to the 19 existing courses covered by the scheme that already started last autumn. Currently, there are no Romanian universities involved, but I trust that some Romanian institutions are keen on being part of the Master courses selected in the next rounds.

European universities should also develop a system of mutual recognition in order to make European quality assurance coherent and trustworthy. I know that there is a draft law in Romania in this area, as well as plans to set up the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I said earlier that universities are the temples of cultural diversity.

Preservation and promotion of cultural diversity are among the founding principles of the European model.

They are enshrined in the Treaty, in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and they figure prominently in our future Constitution.

Cultural diversity cuts across all policies—be them trade, competition or structural funds.

Of course, the cultural sectors play a crucial role, both in terms of allowing diversity of cultural expressions but also in disseminating them within and outside Europe.

Cultural industries play a growing role in economic development and employment policies (linked to tourism for example). At the same time, they demonstrate the vitality of our diverse identities and expressions in Europe, which form the richness of our continent.

In this respect, culture generates growth and can make an important contribution to the revitalisation of the economic structures of the Union called for in our Lisbon strategy.

The preservation and promotion of cultural diversity also apply to the external dimension of the Community action. The EU promotes this model in its international relations, as a contribution to a world order based on sustainable development, peaceful coexistence, and dialogue between cultures.

Cultural diversity means exchanges, including through commercial trade of cultural goods and services. It also means that such trade must be balanced, so as to allow for the preservation and promotion of diverse cultural expressions around the world.

We have an opportunity to promote these principles at the ongoing negotiations of the UNESCO Convention on cultural diversity.

The European Union strongly supported the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and its Action Plan by UNESCO in November 2001.

Since then, the question of the elaboration of an international legal instrument on cultural diversity has been the focal point of the international debate.

Finally, the General Conference of UNESCO, in October 2003, took the unanimous decision to launch negotiations on an instrument on cultural diversity.

This negotiation is fundamental for the European Community and the EU as a whole. The purpose of the Convention is to establish a new pillar of the global governance dealing with cultural diversity.

This should be seen as the counterpart of WTO for trade, WHO for health, and Multilateral Environmental Agreements for the environment.

The Convention should:

- affirm the specific and dual nature of cultural goods and services, which are both cultural and economic goods;

- recognize the role of public policies in the protection and promotion of cultural diversity; and
- recognise the importance of international cooperation to face cultural vulnerabilities, above all in developing countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me go back to cultural diversity and to the peaceful coexistence of the distinct linguistic, religious, and ethnic communities which today make the fabric of our European societies.

As I was browsing the curricula offered by this university today, I noted you have an academic and research chair for the Study of Inter-cultural and Inter-religious Exchanges, with the collaboration of UNESCO.

I was pleased to see that such programme fosters co-operation with many universities in Europe and beyond—from Austria to Great Britain; from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan; from Israel to Lebanon.

As you may know, dialogue between cultures and peoples is a clear priority for the Commission. As soon as I took office, last November, I decided we should celebrate the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, now set for 2008.

Many of our Community programmes already incorporate this intercultural feature. I am thinking of Culture but also Education, Youth and more generally civil society and people-to-people programmes.

The need for more inter-cultural dialogue today is felt on many levels.

Enlargement has increased the diversity of the Union, the EU has become more “European” and this will continue in the next few years when Romania and other countries will join the EU.

Integration will never be complete until and unless the many peoples and cultures of the Union get to know and respect each other.

In fact, tolerance and respect are not enough. What we need is mutual curiosity, we need to support actions that take people out of their own and help them reach out towards the other.

Inter-cultural dialogue is required also to within our cities, that often host peoples from across Europe and beyond who go there in search of better living conditions and better prospects.

These are what I call the ‘new Europeans’. The challenge of their integration and that of their children into the economic and social fabric of the continent will shape our political future for many years to come.

With new Europeans too, what we need is understanding, co-operation, and working together across cultural barriers. With them, inter-cultural dialogue is an essential ingredient for success.

Finally, inter-cultural dialogue is a powerful tool to spread and maintain peace and stability in the region. The soft power of the Union has already achieved results that would have been unthinkable only 10 years ago.

The peaceful and orderly transit of much of Central and Eastern Europe towards democracy and the rule of law is the political masterpiece of the Union since its foundation.

Now, the Union will have to deal with new neighbours. With these, a good understanding across cultural divides is absolutely essential. From it depend vital issues; above all peace, which is the main reason why the Union was established almost half a century ago.

The European year of inter-cultural dialogue will give visibility to all these issues.

It will give a better chance to the spirit of dialogue, it will increase mutual knowledge and it will project a more positive image of Europe to its own citizens and to the world beyond.

Thank you.