

Ms. Androulla Vassiliou  
Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth  
European Commission  
Wetstraat 200 (BERL.10/110)  
B-10 49 BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

8th March 2011

Re: Consultation on Modernisation of Higher Education

Dear Ms. Vassilou,

As representatives of the increasingly large group of European students studying in a European Union member state different from their nationality, we would like to take part in the public consultation on the modernisation of higher education in Europe. Netherlands Worldwide Students (NEWS) is a foundation that represents Dutch citizens studying abroad to obtain a degree from a foreign institution. Established in 2007, NEWS forms a network now connecting more than 2000 Dutch students across the globe (of a total of approximately 15,000 studying to obtain a degree at an institution abroad).

Through our website [www.newstudent.nl](http://www.newstudent.nl), social media and regular meetings in the Netherlands and abroad, we facilitate contact between students studying abroad, those that wish to do so and employers interested to recruit these students after completion of their studies. We also represent these students at regular meeting with the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and other relevant institutions.

Having set numerous ambitious targets for student mobility, it is now time for ambitious measures. One such measure is the creation of a fund that will provide scholarships for ambitious and motivated students from the European Union, who would like to study at a top institution in a different EU member state. Such a fund would be the counterpart of the Erasmus Programme, yet with a focus on academic excellence instead of cultural exchange.

Below we expand on the challenges and opportunities for European higher education, as we see these. We believe that the experiences of the students we represent will be shared by an increasingly large group of students. Students that are not held back by the boundaries within European space for higher education: the students of the future!

### *Challenges*

Perhaps with the exception of the United Kingdom, Europe's universities can be characterized as a flat landscape without many extreme peaks and troughs despite a generally very high level. To illustrate this, Europe's universities are very well represented among the world's top 200 universities, but largely absent in the list of top 50 universities. Many students who decide to study abroad (including those we represent) often set out to study at a 'top institution', and, in many cases, they find these in the UK or the US. To retain all its talent, we think Europe must be brave enough to stimulate a more peaked higher education landscape and to select champions: top institutions that can compete with their counterparts in the US and their future counterparts in China and the rest of East Asia.

On a more practical level, with increasing numbers of students from home and abroad, the need will arise to harmonize the way education is paid for. As different national governments within the EU will provide

different levels of financial support for students and charge different tuition fees in search for budget cuts, flows of students across national borders will become increasingly significant in years to come. Based on the current financial framework, we expect this will create tensions between net contributors, those who accept more students, and net benefactors, those who send more students abroad. The case of Wales and Scotland versus England, where tuition fees are set to raise dramatically, will provide a showcase for similar developments that are inevitable across Europe.

With particular relevance to measures to stimulate mobility, so-called portable student support enabling students such as offered by the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, will come under threat should the EU court rule that residence requirements (the 3-out-of-6 rule), which have been instituted to make these measures feasible, are in contradiction with the non-discrimination principle. In the absence of more structural measures to stimulate mobility, independent attempts by national governments to do so must not be discouraged. If the EU court ruling leads to an end to portable student support for Dutch students, that would seriously impede progress on Europe's student mobility targets.

### *Opportunities*

The Erasmus Programme has been very successful in stimulating cultural exchange between students from different countries within the EU. From our experience, it also often acts as a stepping stone to obtain an entire degree at a university in a different EU member state: having spent a semester in the final years of a Bachelor degree abroad, the decision to obtain a Master degree abroad becomes much easier. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that the experience of an Erasmus one is largely a cultural one and not predominantly and academic one.

What is lacking is a programme that provides funding for talented and motivated students to study in a different European country as part of their (academic) career curriculum and specifically for academic reasons. These students, predominantly at Master level, are attracted by a certain institution because of its particular research potential. Their choice is an intrinsic part of the career path they intend to pursue. But this so-called diploma mobility remains difficult to achieve, as most European students are expected to pay for their own tuition fees when studying abroad.

We would like to propose the creation of a European fund that finances the study of talented, young Europeans who aspire a degree at a European top university in another country. The Huygens Scholarship Programme, as administered by the Dutch government, could provide an important showcase of such a programme. Implementing such a programme on a EU level would not only encourage students to take up a leadership role on a EU-wide level, it would also pave the way for a more interconnected European space for higher education and research.

We hope our views will be taken into account in the formulation of the strategic direction for the future development of European higher education.

Yours sincerely

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