

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

The Knowledge Triangle: Shaping the Future of Europe

Swedish Presidency Conference

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Speech

[Greet personalities in attendance],

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honoured to open this conference and I wish to thank our Swedish hosts for putting the issue on top of the political agenda.

Linking education, research and innovation into the knowledge triangle is a major challenge for Europe's future prosperity and social cohesion.

We have been looking for better forms of integration among these three sides for quite a while, and I welcome the idea of stressing the role of education, and in particular the role of universities.

These reflections are closely linked with the modernisation agenda for universities that the European Commission launched in earnest three years ago.

We have come a long way since then; we can be proud of the progress we have made, but there is no room for complacency. There is still a great deal of untapped potential in Europe's higher education:

- first, more people should go to university and education authorities should have more lifelong learning programmes for non-traditional learners;
- second, in many countries higher education is still fragmented and underfunded; and
- finally, many curricula are not adapted to the needs of the labour market.

Our modernisation agenda tries to address these and other challenges. It calls for more diversification of universities' profiles, based on their strengths.

In my view, all universities must preserve and enrich their traditional values, but this does not mean that all should offer the same mix of study programmes, research and services.

In the knowledge era, universities have become more important than ever; as a consequence they should become more accountable towards their students, the local communities, and society at large.

This is also reflected in the New Skills for New Jobs' Initiative which aims to match skills to labour market needs and ensure the employability of graduates.

We also need more transparency regarding the missions and performances of institutions and we need to be able to design our education policies using better and more reliable data.

This is why I have launched a feasibility study for a European University Data Collection and a possible European classification of higher-education institutions.

Another new project which we are funding is the design and testing of a new ranking methodology that is independent, global and multi-dimensional.

This will help students and their families to make better-informed choices; it will also help universities to position themselves and improve their strategies and performance.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I've just shared my view that there is a lot of untapped potential in Europe's higher education. The same applies to Europe's research potential, which is not being exploited to the full.

The attempt to build a European Higher Education Area – the Bologna process – was designed to address the first challenge.

Shortly after the launch of the Bologna process, the Commission proposed a European Research Area to support the creation of a research-friendly environment in Europe.

The plan was revived last year under the Slovenian presidency with an important policy initiative called the Ljubljana process.

These processes are clearly complementary, especially when we consider that both are vital to the Union's efforts to boost innovation and take Europe into the knowledge age as a world leader.

On the ground, the overlaps are obvious because the bulk of Europe's research is carried out in our universities.

If one wanted to look for a tangible example of the knowledge triangle, one should look no further than the third cycle in a research university, where doctoral studies and early-stage research careers often coexist.

The Bologna process is far from perfect, but nobody can deny that it has yielded impressive results over the past decade.

Its success is largely due to an innovative working method, based on open discussions and joint decision-making that involves governments, the Commission, and the main stakeholders, including universities and students.

It is unlikely that this approach can be replicated wholesale, but the effort to build a European Research Area could take inspiration from it, in particular as regards governance and decision-making.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am talking of education, research and innovation coming together as one in the policies of the Union. The European Institute of Innovation and Technology – or EIT – is the most important and promising initiative this Commission has taken to promote the integration of the knowledge triangle.

From 2005 – when the idea was first raised – to date – when the first call for proposals has just closed – the EIT has seen an impressive development.

In the beginning there were reservations, as was to be expected with such an original and bold idea. But today the concept has proven its worth: scepticism has turned into widespread support, and reluctance into real commitment from the leading stakeholders.

When talking to universities, research centres, and innovative businesses, I often hear that Europe really needed an EIT, and for three main reasons:

- to spark reform in higher-education;
- to make research more conducive to innovation; and
- to unlock new business opportunities and foster entrepreneurship.

I have no doubt that the EIT, with its novel concept of the Knowledge and Innovation Communities or KICs, is a milestone towards a better integration of the knowledge triangle in Europe and abroad.

Let me just focus on two of the many areas where I think the EIT will have a positive impact: fostering Europe's human potential and building partnerships open to the world.

Talent is Europe's most precious asset, and a key to boosting competitiveness and employment.

The people the EIT will involve will be its mainspring. Via the KICs, the Institute will stimulate a new generation of highly talented and creative students, researchers and risk-taking entrepreneurs, who will drive tomorrow's innovation.

Innovation is the result of special knowledge, skills and attitudes, and I would argue that attitudes are the greatest weakness in Europe's innovation performance.

The EIT, by its example, will help to change these.

But a critical message during this year devoted to creativity and innovation is that attitudes are often set way before people reach higher education.

As to the other issue I want to raise, that of partnerships open to the world, let me tell you that while the EIT has its feet on European ground, its vision is global.

We cannot draw artificial borders to the free flow of knowledge and ideas. And where borders do exist, we need to tear them down.

The EIT will not ask where its talent comes from. The question to a talented and motivated student, researcher or entrepreneur from anywhere in the world should be: "which skills, knowledge, ideas, and attitudes can you bring to your KIC?"

The message that 'the EIT is the place to be' for radical innovators will be important in establishing its identity worldwide.

We have therefore designed the Institute and its KICs with a clear international ambition and an unprecedented degree of openness to participation from outside the EU.

I am convinced that the EIT label – and especially EIT-branded degrees and diplomas – will soon become a trademark of quality with the potential to attract the brightest minds from Europe and abroad.

I cannot wait to see the first KICs take up their activities soon. They have a unique opportunity – but also the responsibility – to establish how actors from all corners of the knowledge triangle will work and innovate together.

The cooperation models and working methods established by those first KICs can shape our innovation and knowledge landscape for years to come.

I congratulate the EIT Governing Board for what has been achieved so far and I wish them every success for the future – some Board members are here today or will join us in the next days.

We need new solutions for a rapidly changing world. I am convinced that the EIT can be a driving force in this regard.

We also need to redouble our efforts in the other areas I have touched upon today. I agree with the Presidency that, with continuing globalisation and increased striving for excellence, the three sides of the knowledge triangle must be strengthened.

Among other things, this means more and better partnerships between knowledge-building institutions and other stakeholders, such as employers, at regional, national, and European level.

Existing and future policies and initiatives must be integrated and coordinated to strengthen the interaction between the three corners of the knowledge triangle, in terms of governance, operations and financing.

As the present Commission prepares to hand over the baton to the next, I believe that work on research, innovation, and higher-education reform should be intensified.

This continued effort would send a clear message that a cultural shift is needed to create a better environment for creative and entrepreneurial thinking.

Europe has what it takes to make it happen. If we work together towards clear objectives, I have no doubt that we will succeed.

Thank you.