

Janez Potočnik

European Commissioner for Science and Research

The significance of the knowledge triangle for the future of Europe

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Conference "the Knowledge Triangle Shaping the Future of Europe" (organised by the Swedish Presidency)

Gothenburg, 1st September 2009

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning,

Greta Garbo - a famous Swede - once said "I want to be alone". Perhaps it is a good thing then that she was never in charge of Europe's research policy – especially these days when pulling together, not striking out on our own is the chosen strategy.

First I would like to welcome the initiative of the Swedish Presidency in holding this conference. We know what makes up the knowledge triangle – the holy trinity of education, research and innovation. But as my colleague Jan Figel' stressed yesterday at the conference launch, it is now an important step to see where and how we can improve the interactions between those three triangle points and make the whole structure stronger.

One of the best things about preaching to the converted is that you do not have to remind your audience of the basics. Because you are already knowledge converts, I know that you share my belief of the importance of a well-functioning knowledge triangle to achieve the knowledge-based economy and society that are needed for a sustained economic growth.

This has been the 'EU view' since the Lisbon Strategy was revised in 2005. If we want a European Research Area, if we want knowledge to circulate as the 'fifth freedom', we must also make universities and research institutions stronger and better connected to a more competitive business sector.

These things are not in doubt. And I do share the view of the Swedish Presidency – outlined in the Lund Declaration from earlier this summer – that we need to:

- Do a better job of coordinating all points of our knowledge triangle;
- Strengthen the ways to work together; and
- Deliver on the challenges we face.

The Lund Declaration also acknowledges, as I have done on many occasions, the key role that universities have in these tasks. The knowledge triangle needs universities. They sit in a unique and privileged position between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. They are the primary source of new knowledge generation as well as important providers of applied knowledge which supports business research and innovation. That is why I have spoken about Universities being the new "multinationals of the knowledge industry".

Nevertheless, as pointed out by the Commission and the Member States (and again, in the Lund Declaration) universities need to modernise. They still face challenges on autonomy, funding, diversity, partnerships with the business community, knowledge sharing with society to be able to fully exploit their potential to contribute to the Lisbon Agenda.

Now, I know that 'subsidiarity' is not a particularly sexy word, but in this context it is unavoidable. Because the responsibility for rejuvenating universities lies with the Member States. This is not a question of pushing the problem onto someone else, more of letting the best-placed people do the job. And it is not as if we are washing our hands of the process. Far from it. Our experience shows that European cooperation can give real added value to the whole process.

We are supporting this university modernisation process – as part of the task of strengthening the knowledge triangle within the ERA. At the end of 2008, we

launched a partnership for researchers and an initiative on knowledge transfer, both of which are key issues for universities and other knowledge organisations.

Of course, in practice, the university modernisation agenda will run and run. And some issues are in the process of being worked out. At the March Competitiveness Council earlier this year I raised the issue of putting common guidelines together for responsible external research funding. This would help funding institutions and knowledge builders to speak a more understandable common language, and help us achieve the goal of more strategic and relevant funded research.

The idea of ranking universities is one we are looking into as well – with the help of our colleagues in the education sector and with the support of Eurostat. This is a complex concept and one that demands a multidimensional approach to university performance, which looks at the three sides of the knowledge triangle. Why? Because if we really want to understand the contribution universities are making – if we want to measure and compare excellence with other institutions – we must have a workable system to do it with. We need to be able to reflect the reality of the increasingly diverse nature of universities, users and disciplines. And in this, clarity of purpose, choice of metrics and weightings will be critical.

An expert group report on the subject is due in the coming weeks and the testing of the multidimensional approach will take place in 2010.

As you can see, there are still some pending issues and we need to continue to chip away at the barriers which might hold back our modern and ambitious European universities.

When I talk about barriers, we know that we live in a world where the barriers are changing, or rather have changed for good. We are living and working in an open economy. Interconnectedness and openness are the watchwords of today's world.

Universities and other research institutions want to engage in this changed ecosystem; it would be surprising if they wanted to do otherwise. They see how the research landscape is altering and they expect the support of public policy at national and European level in their quest to become top players not simply in their specialist areas, but globally.

But it is not so straightforward, because the nature of that support needs to be changed too. Across the EU the need for structural change is increasingly recognized. Several Member States have reformed or are in the process of reforming their university landscape, for instance by promoting mergers, developing greater scale effects and building on the principles of autonomy and accountability.

From my point of view – and that of EU policy making - the bottom line is effective cooperation and networking. This has to do a bit with money but more significantly it has to do with excellence and also organisation and strategic positioning. However most importantly of all, this is about getting the best talent and making sure it can 'link up'. I will always use a sports metaphor if I feel it can illustrate a point. Here it seems to me we are in a position of having a European research football team with strong expertise in defence, midfield and attack, but which still lacks the kind of player who can play the ball out of defence into midfield or send that killer pass forward for a striker to score.

Cooperation and networking...two words that suggest we need to think harder about a European strategy for our knowledge building institutions. This is what the Swedish Presidency is calling for and I agree with them. We could, for example, look at the growing phenomena of 'graduate schools'. How best to organise, connect and fund them? What role can European instruments play? I think the EIT's Knowledge and Innovation Community concept would be a good example for the European Graduate Schools to follow, integrating the three sides of the knowledge triangle.

We certainly have the tools to do the job – and the will. We have a committed and strong European research system. It has the backing of strong public sector involvement in knowledge production and dissemination. And I believe that public policy can make just as significant a contribution to improving Europe's knowledge ecosystem through education and innovation.

During my (nearly) five years in this job I have concentrated on putting excellence into European research. We have done this in lots of ways, not least through the European Research Council. At the broadest level, the European Research Area optimises and opens up research programmes at European, national and regional levels to support the best research throughout Europe. It coordinates these programmes so that we can use them to address the major challenges of our time, together.

For Universities, the 21st Century finds them both diverse and increasingly multi-functional – a bit like a 'swiss army' knowledge knife. University research is still deeply associated with teaching, knowledge exchange and civic engagement – in marketing terms, the university brand is well known and extremely important. But for that research base to thrive in Europe, its universities have to stay dynamic. They have to take themselves into places they have never been before, or rarely been before. They have to plunge further into the education – research and innovation ecosystem where universities, research institutions and business interact, cooperate, compete, develop and excel.

We are pushing these angles. For example, on the innovation side, it is worth noting that the EIT promotes cross-fertilisation and cross-funding between itself and other Community and national initiatives and programmes. Universities are of course part of this initiative.

Another example is a project for a life sciences park that was presented to me on a visit to Malta and which is clearly an appropriate direction for 'plugged in' universities. This is being created by Malta Enterprise and with the full cooperation and involvement of the Maltese government, the University of Malta and the country's largest hospital – and with 12 million euros of European Structural Funds investment. It will be a knowledge-based research village which will target innovative companies and start ups with the aim of bringing investment and innovation to that dynamic island.

And yet another example... at a broader level... will involve the adoption by the Commission tomorrow, of a communication on innovation. This will be something of an innovation 'stock take'. It will look back and assess to what extent our previous innovation strategies, have been effective and how they can help us prepare to innovate better in the future. This will be a crucial document – not just for this

Presidency, but for the coming years as our need for innovation and innovative policies evolves with the world around us.

And why should we do this? Because although some have spoken about green shoots of recovery, our economies are not yet 'out of the woods'. Common sense, as well as decades of examples, shows us that we have to reinforce our commitment and our spending on knowledge-based activities. Because this is the only way we are going to achieve sustainable and governable economic development and welfare. The principles of excellence in research and education leading to world-beating innovation, are crucial for this achievement.

Innovation capacity allied to higher education capability – this is what makes the world go round these days.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope I have been strong enough in my support for the European dimension of the knowledge triangle and the role universities must play in it. From the role of funding agencies, to the mobility of students and mutual recognition of curricula, European doctoral training, professionalization of university managers, the need for a code of good practice for international cooperation, opening recruitment to international staff and students; there is a need for stronger collaboration at the European level.

The knowledge triangle is the framework through which we will give a new impetus to the modernisation of universities. The debate started by the Swedish Presidency with today's seminar will help us reflect on what support the EU should give through its future actions.

As any civil engineer will tell you....the triangle is the strongest shape of all.

Thank you and I wish you the best for the remainder of the conference.