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The President of the European University Foundation – “Campus Europae”, Prof. Noel Whelan, and the President of the European Council for Student Affairs (ECSTA), Achim Meyer auf der Heyde on the occasion of the Seminar, held in Munsbach, Luxembourg, on the 4th of April, 2005, under the patronage of the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union represented by Mr. François Biltgen, Minister for Culture, Higher Education and Research of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg

Title of Seminar: „Social Fairness in Student Exchange Programmes in Europe“

For the last 15 years the European student exchange programmes have supported and facilitated exchanges of more than one million students to help them gain study and life experiences in other European countries and cultures. The Erasmus grant system has facilitated these exchanges; without this programme many young people would not have had the opportunity to realise their hopes of studying abroad. Notwithstanding the impact of Erasmus, the Bologna-follow-up-conference in Prague, in 2001, asked that more attention be given to the “social dimension” of the student exchange programmes. Without any doubt, this topic will be one of the most important tasks to be accomplished in the formulation of the European Higher Education Policy in the near future.

The existing regulations for financing student exchange in Europe pay little if any attention to the social background of the students, nor to the differences in living costs between the home university and the host university. Because of this, availing of the existing exchange system is

possible only for those students who get enough money from their parents, their relatives or from state grants.

This system leads to a structural disadvantaging of those students who are obliged to earn money during their study programme at home. Approximately 40 to 60 per cent of the European students belong to this group. In some European countries this group represents the majority of students.

For these students, the existing Erasmus grant of 150€ per month will not be sufficient. In view of the budget situation of the European Union it does not seem very plausible that the Commission can, in the short term, support this group of students. So for them, earning money will be a continuing necessity. On the other hand, earning money in a host country can be very difficult because labour restrictions make it very difficult for students from foreign countries to get a job in the neighbourhood of the host university.

It is therefore highly desirable, and indeed necessary, to open the existing European exchange programmes to experiments and pilot projects with a view to giving more attention to the “social dimension” of the exchange programmes. Part of this “social dimension” is to take care of and provide the “social and cultural infrastructure” for foreign students on exchange programmes. It is only with the support of such an infrastructure that it will be possible for students to obtain a deeper understanding of the society and culture of the host country.

Separate from the solving of the social situation for exchange students, the European universities must also increase their interest in having a higher student exchange rate amongst themselves. The existing support programmes provide very important incentives to build up general networks among European universities. The enormous success of the European

Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was possible only because of the increase of the exchange programme, the building up of networks and the commitment of European universities.

In recent years, students have displayed a growing tendency to prefer universities in countries with widely spoken languages such as English and Spanish. But for the understanding of Europe's "unity in diversity" it is important to convince students to go to the other countries, too, by increasing the attractiveness of universities in these countries which so-called "minor" languages.

For that it is necessary to give new incentives to the European universities to increase their interest in accepting and welcoming foreign students, and to support the social infrastructure and the international networking related to this.

University networks should be encouraged to act as "open laboratories" for intensifying student-exchange. In these "laboratories" all necessary criteria, regulations and support measures should be tested and further developed. The continuing development of the Bologna Process can only be achieved, at its fullest, if a creative and efficient programme for meeting and solving the challenges is supported.

So, a central recommendation is that the Bologna-follow-up-conference in Bergen, as well as the European Union be asked to facilitate and support such above mentioned experiments within the framework of the Erasmus programme.

Noel Whelan
President
European University Foundation –
Campus Europae

Achim Meyer auf der Heyde
President
European Council for Student Affairs