

Androulla Vassiliou – Commissioner for Education and Training

"Europe through students' eyes" – UNICA Student Conference

Rome, 22 September 2010

Video message

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear students,

I would like to start by saying my warmest "Thank you" to UNICA for inviting me to be with you today.

Unfortunately, I cannot be with you in person. I will have to rely on this message to show you all my support for your initiative, as well as my personal interest in your network

To start with, I would like to commend your idea of launching an internet poll to select the topics for your conference.

I think it's a brilliant move, and the outcome is there to prove it.

The ten topics that have emerged from your poll are a spot-on picture of the challenges and opportunities of Europe's higher education today.

Also, your decision to open the debate to your members through the Net reminds me of what we do at the European Commission.

In the policy areas under my responsibility, every major initiative is prepared by what we call a 'public consultation' through the Net.

We have received plenty of good ideas; but what I like most about these consultations is that they take full advantage of the civic potential of the Web.

This is the Internet at its best; a space for inclusion, engagement, and democratic participation open to all.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear students,

I commend initiatives like yours, which stoke the debate on Europe's universities. I cannot think of debates that are more crucial for our future prosperity and social well-being.

Universities have always been vital for Europe's economies and societies, and they are more so in these times of crisis.

Young people are being hit particularly hard by the crisis; among other things, it is a shock for me to think that about one young European in five is unemployed.

A good study programme – exciting, challenging, and focussed on the students' job prospects – is the best insurance policy you can get against unemployment and social exclusion.

And I'm not thinking about universities only; schools and training centres are just as important. All of Europe's systems of learning must be involved.

So – today more than ever – we need to reform our universities and research centres. And your ten topics have identified all the main reforms.

Your keywords are internationalisation, mobility, and multiculturalism. You also speak of innovation, hard and soft skills, and the Bologna process.

It seems to me that we are speaking the same language across the board. And let us not forget the most important issue of all.

We need to persuade Europe's education authorities – that is, national and regional governments – to resist the temptation to cut higher-education funding as they struggle to rein in public spending.

Let me make this point clear; I'm not calling for the preservation of the *status quo*. Universities can save some money; they can become more efficient and should diversify their sources of funding.

But universities remain vital for our future growth, jobs, and social welfare. Depriving them of resources would be short-sighted and misguided.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear students,

I'd like to congratulate you again for this initiative.

Let me wish you a very productive meeting in Rome, and all the best for the future of UNICA

Thank you for your attention