

Speech EU Conference

Sofia Larsen, Lund 5 October 2009

“Erasmus – the way forward and the Green Paper on Mobility of Young People”

Dear Commissioner, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very happy to be here today and to have this opportunity to meet you all. And it is especially interesting to be meeting here in Lund where we have one of Sweden's most eminent, and ancient, universities with its world class education and research.

As you know, Lund will also host the massive ESS research facility (European Spallation Source). We are very happy about this and it will mean a lot - for Sweden of course - but above all for the development of qualitative research at the highest level.

I am here, as Chair of the parliamentary Committee on Education and as a representative of one of the four Swedish government parties (the Centre Party). It is a privilege for Sweden to be responsible for the EU Presidency in these challenging times. Both the Government and the Parliament give high priority to questions concerning cooperation in education and research.

You all have some interesting, and important, days in front of you here in Lund. You will discuss future educational cooperation in Europe and how best to promote increased mobility across national borders.

There are many important issues on the agenda which will influence continued EU cooperation. How we are going to manage globalisation in the future is one of these issues. Major challenges remain, of course, in the wake of the financial crisis. But there is a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel.

### *The opportunities and challenges of globalisation*

Globalisation is something positive and something that affects us all. Extended insight and knowledge, and of course our resolve, will decide if we in Europe will be able to benefit fully from these opportunities. Clearly-defined activities moving in a definite direction are essential here.

However, globalisation also means major challenges. One of the most important of these challenges is to strengthen Europe's competitiveness. Another is to counteract segregation and alienation. And yet another is to combat nationalistic isolation.

I am convinced that

**a high quality educational system,  
enhanced knowledge levels among the population  
and increased mobility across national borders**

are some of the decisive factors necessary to increase competitiveness. At the same time, we have to work to combat alienation and segregation in the EU.

We must put serious effort into dealing with the shortfalls in knowledge within our school systems. Something that is well underway in Sweden. We must also achieve improved quality within higher education and research. Europe must not lose ground in comparison to other parts of the world.

Possession of knowledge is a necessary precondition. But we also have to become better at applying this knowledge and creating innovation if we are to compete with the USA, Asia and other economies. Encouraging people's powers of initiative and utilising innovations and ideas are important means to reach this goal. These are the foundations of good economic growth and many, expanding companies.

### *So what is the Swedish Government doing?*

Lack of quality in educational systems is a challenge for many countries within the EU. Sweden is a small country with a knowledge-intensive economy. For us the quality of higher education and research is crucial to our attractiveness as a knowledge nation.

The Swedish Government's answer to the challenge of globalisation is a thorough overhaul of the entire educational system – from pre-school to research.

The structure of our future knowledge society is founded during our children's first years at school. It is important to emphasise that. It is an aspect that is often forgotten in the debate.

If we give our students a good start in life we also lay the foundations for opportunities. Opportunities for both the student – and for society in general.

A good, well-functioning school that equips young people for the future is one of the most important pillars of any society. Because a good school serves to

create equal conditions and to give everyone an honest chance to succeed in life. A good school lays the foundations for students' development and opportunities.

It gives students the courage to believe in themselves and to pursue their dreams. If we succeed with this, we will have a flourishing country with good economic growth. But we will also have a country that is open and that inspires mobility. This is my firm conviction.

Today's schoolchildren are tomorrow's workforce! Our young people of today will, to an increasing extent, live on a global arena: That goes whether they are out backpacking, studying or working abroad during different periods in their lives, or whether they move to another country for good.

By increasing our level of ambition and investments in quality at an early stage in the school life of children and young people, we are also laying the groundwork for better quality within higher education and research.

Quality in higher education is a constant concern. In several countries systems and structures for quality assurance have recently been reformed and changes are in progress. This is also the case in Sweden. The Swedish Government is investing large amounts of resources in order to improve the quality of higher education. Work is also underway to provide Swedish universities and university colleges with increased autonomy, so that they may have greater opportunities to develop into free, internationally competitive seats of learning based on their own, individual preconditions.

I would especially like to mention the investments we have made to improve the quality of Swedish research by, for example, increasing the amount of research

funding that is exposed to competition. This is a historic input of which we (I) am very proud.

### ***Higher Education during the Presidency***

Efforts to strengthen the “knowledge triangle” is of great importance for the modernization process of the European universities. Such a process can contribute to strengthening institutions, improving industrial competitiveness and societal development in general.

There are increased demands on universities to engage in both teaching and research and innovation. This requires a new and more modern approach to universities. This is an important part in the modernization process in Europe. In support of this development there is a need of coordinated efforts at both national and EU level. The Swedish Presidency recently held a conference on the knowledge triangle, where there were constructive discussions on these issues.

The EU's modernization agenda for universities in Europe stresses the importance of quality assurance issues. Highly relevant questions concern what should be evaluated and monitored and the need for control over the universities increased autonomy. During the meeting of EU Directors General for Higher Education this autumn these issues will be discussed

### ***Student mobility and Erasmus***

One important means of improving Europe's competitiveness and reducing alienation is increasing the mobility of the labour force and students.

The growth of a global education market is to be promoted and stimulated to a greater extent. This gives students a greater knowledge of the world around them. It also provides them with personal connections that can be of long term importance to themselves and to society in general. Having studied abroad is a very good qualification. For one thing it prepares for a professional and social life on the international market.

It is very pleasing that global mobility among students has increased substantially over the last few years. Since the inception of the programme in 1987, the number of Erasmus students in Europe has increased from around 3 200 students to around 162 000 students for the last academic year.

When my parents were young, studying abroad was something very unusual and possible only for a privileged few in society. When I went on to study at university in the beginning of the 1990s, new opportunities and a new market emerged with Sweden entering the EU and the Erasmus programme, for example. Only a few students from my university took the chance. Today, everyone is offered the chance. And in some cases a term abroad is a natural part of the programme.

- **or rather, it should be a natural part.**

Unfortunately, Swedish participation in Erasmus is low in comparison to other countries. The number of Swedish students participating in the Erasmus programme has decreased steadily since the end of the 1990s, from around 3 300 students ten years ago to approximately 2 300 students today. Consequently, only 14 per cent of students have studied abroad during their course of study.

In my opinion, this figure is far too low! It is important for us to reverse this trend. The Swedish Government has consequently proposed that universities

should have the opportunity to issue **joint degrees** together with other foreign universities.

This year, Swedish universities and university colleges will also be presenting a special account of their work for greater internationalisation. The Government will study these accounts thoroughly and then consider whether further measures are necessary. All in order to meet the challenges of globalisation and to promote the internationalisation of Swedish higher education. This will help to give a clear picture of work that is being done in this area. Universities can also gain inspiration from each other in their continued efforts.

We have recently decided to introduce a grant programme for student exchanges with countries outside the EU. The programme will be a complement to already existing programmes. And it will be targeted at countries outside Europe with which there is potential to develop long-term relations. And which currently have limited opportunities to offer grants for students at Swedish universities and university colleges.

We are also allocating special resources to increase the number of **teacher exchanges**. The Swedish International Programme Office for Education and Training is to take measures to stimulate more teachers to participate in exchanges.

Teachers with international experiences and international contacts will not only increase their knowledge of their subjects. They can also inspire younger students to take some of their courses in another country.

*The Green Paper*

The EU Commission has recently put forward a **Green Paper on the Mobility of Young People**. I consider this green paper a very important initiative in order to put essential questions on the European agenda. My parliamentary committee will discuss the green paper during the autumn and thereafter give its opinion to the commission.

An important measure in this context is to make information on studies and work internationally more easily available. Not least important is increased information activities aimed at reaching the more disadvantaged groups in society. This is also pointed out in the Green Paper. Mobility across national borders is to be possible for everyone!

### *Conclusion*

When more people gain the opportunity to study, teach or do research for in another country, unique social, political and cultural connections are established. I am convinced that this will be of great importance to integration and openness between countries – both inside and outside the borders of Europe.

I look forward, together with you all, to continuing the development of our European educational cooperation. Education – and knowledge – are decisive for the future welfare of Europe.

I sincerely hope that you enjoy some inspiring, exciting days in Lund and in Sweden. Thank you for your time.