

**CONTINUITY, CONSOLIDATION AND CHANGE
TOWARDS A EUROPEAN ERA OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Agora Conference, 16-17 March 2009, Thessaloniki

Commissioner,

Minister,

Madam Director,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like to thank you very much, on behalf of the Minister, for the invitation to this conference and the opportunity to be among the first speakers of the day.

I was asked to represent the EU Council Presidency here, and it is therefore a pleasant duty for me to talk to you briefly about the current issues and priorities of the Czech Presidency in the first half of 2009.

Personally, I am very pleased that I can speak at this conference at a very important time for the further development of European cooperation in education and vocational training. It is important for two reasons: first, in the present situation in Europe, with the economic crisis being discussed at all levels, we in education and training *also* have a duty to respond to the situation, and to make *our* contribution to resolving it, in particular from the point of view of long-term developments. The key messages for the spring meeting of the European Council, which were adopted at the February meeting of ministers, focus on this very issue: they place primary emphasis on the development of all individuals through education and training, and remind us of the need to acquire

and supplement skills to ensure employability and prevent the threat of unemployment, or to facilitate a return to the labour market, as the case may be. The key messages also refer to the debate on a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, which I consider to be the most important aspect of the Czech Presidency as regards education. The present crisis has only served to underscore the need to adopt a flexible framework for European cooperation, which – in the light of the present problems – will help mitigate their future impact and repercussions.

I would like to say a few words about that strategic framework, because, given its significance, it is one of the main priorities of the Czech Presidency. As you certainly know, the European Commission communication on this matter was published last December. Since then the Czech Presidency has cooperated with the Commission very closely on defining the framework, which is intended to ensure continuity with current developments and also to outline the challenges, goals, and strategy for future development through to 2020. A very fundamental question is the development of vocational training in Europe – particularly in view of all of the activities and accomplishments achieved thus far. Personally, I think that after 2010 vocational training will play a very important role in the context of lifelong learning, and it will undoubtedly contribute significantly to the achievement of strategic goals of the new common framework, such as ensuring quality, effectiveness, and equity in education and training systems, or support for creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial thinking. I am convinced that European cooperation in vocational training will be one of the main pillars of this framework and will significantly help to fulfil our expectations.

It was with interest that I became acquainted with Cedefop's analysis that is to be presented here today; I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Cedefop on this. I fully identify with the three principles that are mentioned in

its very title: I agree that the continuity and consolidation of our joint efforts must be ensured, as we have commenced work on a number of important initiatives; but this work must be fully implemented. In particular, the common European tools must be put to practical use.

At this point, I would like to mention two important initiatives: the European quality assurance framework in vocational education and training and the European credit system for vocational education and training, which – thanks mainly to the significant progress made in discussions during the French Presidency – should shortly receive official approval in the form of a European Parliament and Council recommendation. I am pleased to announce that their launch will be accompanied by a conference to be held in Prague on 20 May, and – in view of the need to ensure effective implementation of both initiatives by educational institutions and social partners – the conference will focus on a dialogue between those actors about practical implementation.

But to return to the analysis of the development of vocational education, I also think that we are faced with new challenges, to which we must respond adequately. This is also reflected in the initiative pursued by the European Commission and Cedefop, focussing on the development of skills in relation to future jobs and qualification requirements. That initiative has much in common with the second priority of the Czech Presidency that I would like to mention here: the development of cooperation and partnerships between educational institutions and employers. Without wanting in any way to downplay any of the roles that education plays, we think that, especially at this time, a dialogue needs to be developed between the two parties for the benefit of all individuals – to allow all individuals to have the opportunity to acquire the skills they need for career success. I am fully aware that there is now a great deal of such cooperation, in particular in vocational education, and that it is, in fact, one of the pillars of

vocational education; nevertheless, I believe it is important to discuss, for example, the opportunities afforded to Member States in this sphere by European cooperation. Building on the French Presidency, we would also emphasise the need for greater mobility: the opportunity to undertake practical internships, regardless of national borders, is one of the major benefits of our cooperation.

These priorities will be supported during the Czech Presidency through a discussion during the informal meeting of education ministers in Prague in a week's time, and subsequently at a conference at the beginning of April, when the representatives of public administration, educational institutions, and social partners will meet.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to thank you for your attention. I believe that the discussions at this conference will yield many interesting ideas and initiatives for our further cooperation.