

Androulla Vassiliou

Commissioner-designate for Education, Culture, Multilingualism
and Youth

Introductory Remarks

Check Against Delivery
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Hearing at the Education and Culture Committee of the European
Parliament

14 January 2010

Madam President,
Honourable Members,

The hearing of Commissioners-designate before the European Parliament is indeed an expression of democracy and as a former Parliamentarian myself, I am very honoured to participate for the second time in this process.

After what I consider to have been a positive experience as Commissioner for Health, I am delighted to have been invited by President Barroso to take on the portfolio of Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth. It is a portfolio which brings us closer to the citizens of the EU and helps them prepare for the future challenges they may face.

Let me start by sharing with you a personal experience, which was my first insight into what this portfolio can be about.

A few months ago, I was listening to the radio back home and a discussion between secondary school pupils from Cyprus and Finland caught my interest. They had just completed a joint project under the Commission's Comenius Programme. They were very excited by the experience and were explaining how it helped them understand not only the differences between them but also what unites them.

This is of course what the European project is about: unity in diversity - and for me this discussion was an excellent example of what we can do to achieve this goal.

I want to work with you on my key priorities:

- to enhance people's skills and widen access to education and training, focussing on skills that meet current market needs, especially in light of the current economic crisis;
- to open up further mobility and opportunities for young people;
- and to create an environment that nurtures culture and creativity, for every individual and for society as a whole.

Education and Training

If Europe is to compete successfully in the new world economy, we must unlock excellence in education, in research, in innovation. We must equip our young people to secure the high-skilled jobs of the future by upgrading skills and the quality of education.

Higher education is crucial - despite the real progress made under the Bologna process, not enough of our universities match the best in the world. Vocational education and training as well as the education for adults need modernising; and we must also strengthen teacher training, since good teachers are still the number one factor in pupils' success.

The benefits of the new economy must be shared more equally if we are to exit the recession and move to a smarter, greener, knowledge society. This means actively helping:

- the one in six young people who leave school early;

- the one in five 15-year-olds with poor reading skills; and
- the 80 million people who are trying to survive with only low or basic skills.

Increasing investment in education and training is the best way to build a Europe where everyone has the skills to grasp new opportunities after the crisis. Your support in helping secure European budget resources for education and training will be crucial. In this respect, securing the support of national government, regional authorities and the private sector will be an important challenge for us.

The proposed **EU 2020 strategy** allots a key role to education and training as drivers of the higher skills that will fuel sustainable, knowledge-based growth in Europe.

I intend to draw on the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, the Marie Curie actions and Erasmus Mundus programme to energise and modernise higher education and build Europe's global attractiveness for study and research.

I also intend to discuss with you how we can help the European Institute of Innovation and Technology to grow as a flagship for Europe's knowledge-based future.

Marie Curie actions will reinforce our efforts to bring together the European Areas of Higher Education and Research so that knowledge, and the researchers, students and staff who generate it, moves freely across borders. This will help us develop transnational excellence in research and education and transform them into innovation.

Another major priority is streamlining and expanding learning mobility through our new **Youth on the Move** initiative. As our programmes show, learning mobility is extremely effective in enhancing skills and employability and opening people's minds to other cultures.

Our goal is to offer all young people in Europe, whatever their learning path, the opportunities to gain personal and job skills through learning mobility. Other learners, especially teachers, should also be able to benefit from mobility on a much larger scale.

My aim is to set out the future framework of Youth on the Move this summer and propose as soon as possible a new Youth on the Move programme.

As President Barroso has stated in his Political Guidelines, this new initiative will make a decisive contribution to cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and multilingual learning.

Culture and Media

I also want to use the European Agenda for Culture to promote these core European values, as well to boost creativity and innovation in Europe by unlocking the potential of culture and the creative industries. A Green Paper in 2010 will help us identify the European and national actions which will allow our creativity to flourish.

I also look forward to presenting the proposal for a **European heritage label** once the new College is confirmed. It seems to me very symbolic to start the next five years of our cooperation on European culture by celebrating and giving visibility to sites that enshrine European ideals.

Europe is much more than an economic or political project: it is authenticated by strengthening our cultural diversity and values.

I am also very pleased that the President has strengthened the portfolio through the MEDIA programme. European cinema is an outstanding vector of European culture, and the programme builds on a long history of European commitment in this sector.

The challenge for Community action is to translate European cultural diversity into a world-wide competitive industry, contributing to European economic growth and employment. I intend to build on our successes, paying particular attention to the impact of digital technologies on cinema and the need for European cinema to be present on the world stage.

It is of course our ultimate objective to promote cultural and linguistic diversity, including in our external policies. The EU's unique and diverse cultural heritage makes our voice even stronger in today's globalised world.

The UNESCO Convention gives us a strong legal footing, and we have already made good progress in mainstreaming cultural priorities into other policies. I feel we can do more, including on copyright, to ensure a balance between remunerating artists fairly, which is vital for cultural diversity, and widening access to culture.

I intend to work closely with my fellow commissioners on a new digital agenda that achieves that balance.

I will also focus on supporting multilingualism – language learning for employability and skills, and linguistic diversity as part of our rich heritage.

Sport

Finally, I want to explore with you and with stakeholders how to take full advantage of the new Treaty competences in sport, while respecting Community law. We must build on our renewed dialogue with the sports organisations and formalise our cooperation on questions such as promoting fair competition and the fight against doping.

This dialogue could also be the basis for concrete actions at EU level aimed at promoting the educational and social functions of sport as for instance sport can be a key social factor. It is my intention to see how we can best achieve the basis for such work once I take up my duties.

Madam President, honourable Members, these are briefly my objectives for the years to come.

We, Parliament and Commission, will need to build a new partnership as President Barroso announced in his political Guidelines. This is my personal commitment, having already worked alongside this Parliament as Health Commissioner. I am particularly sensitive to ensuring a productive relationship between you and me for the benefit of the areas of my new portfolio.

Thank you.

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Closing Remarks

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Madame President,
Honourable Members,

Thank you once again for your questions and the debate.

I am honoured to have had the opportunity to appear before you and I appreciate your constructive and open approach.

The challenges facing Europe at this juncture are significant. Under the new framework established by the Treaty of Lisbon, and following the principles developed by President Barroso in his political guidelines for the new mandate, it is my conviction that we must invest carefully and effectively in key areas to have a lasting effect on the lives of all Europeans both today and more importantly, tomorrow. We must invest in:

- our youth, to maximise their potential and opportunities;
- in strengthening a genuine knowledge economy, based on our EU values;
- in life-long learning, to equip citizens of all ages with the tools and skills they need to seize the opportunities of the future;
- in sustainable cultural and creative industries, providing wider access to knowledge but at the same time offering fair remuneration to creators;
- in our rich and diverse cultural heritage, which is to be celebrated and promoted;
- and in exploring how sports can be supported further as a medium for improving the lives of Europeans.

Madam President, Honourable Members,

I am inspired by your deep commitment to this portfolio, and to Europe's youth in particular, and I look forward to fostering a fruitful and close partnership with your committees and the European Parliament as a whole.

We share a common goal of providing better opportunities for all our citizens, and a vision of Europe and its cultural values as a source of positive change for a better future.

Thank you once again.