

**AN INTERUNIVERSITY CONFERENCE FOR
AGRICULTURE AND RELATED SCIENCES IN EUROPE**

THE NEED FOR A COLLECTIVE APPROACH

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Ghent, 19. April, 1996

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Colleagues from all over Europe,

Let me first thank the organizers of this conference, especially our colleagues from the host institution, the Faculty of Agriculture and Applied Biological Sciences of the University of Ghent, for hosting us in a marvelous way and for making our stay a most pleasant one. Furthermore, I wish to appreciate the organization and administrative work, which has been done by our ICA/CEDIA office in Brussels. Finally I extend a warm welcome to our colleagues from all over Europe, especially to those who have come from institutions in countries, which are not (yet) member states of the EU.

I do not believe that I exaggerate if I claim that our two-days of meetings and consultations, together with the resulting report with its decisions and recommendations, will prove to be of great significance for higher education throughout Europe in the whole of that field that we might subsume under the heading "Agriculture and the Related Sciences".

It is a term, Ladies and Gentlemen, that I believe we must, with an eye to the future, interpret in its very broadest sense. It involves land management on a large scale. Within the European Union, it includes the sector that absorbs the largest slice of the Union's budget, it has an immense impact on the environment, both positively and negatively, and is perhaps more in the public eye than any other activity carried out within the Union. It is the only sector in which the terms public and consumer are synonymous, which makes it particularly newsworthy. In this overall context, I need only to remind you of the phrase "mad-cow disease" to underline my point.

Above all, in this area, socio-economic and political questions as well as technological developments provide challenges that are of the utmost significance, and this includes the ecological impacts that they have. These challenges must be faced — by the European Union and by countries, and most importantly by those within the Union and within the countries who have a responsibility in respect of education, training and research, be they politicians, administrators or those whose task is to teach and train.

And these challenges have not only national dimensions, but major international ones, an aspect of that should be of particular concern and interest to us.

These challenges have immediacy, and they force change upon us. And in the dissemination of knowledge, as in research, it is of decisive importance to break out of traditional structures and patterns of thought when these can no longer meet the challenges and serve only to preserve the status quo. We have to have the foresight and the courage to establish new, future-oriented, dynamic perspectives. I am deeply convinced that this is especially important for agriculture and the related sciences — yes, more important than for many other areas. Forward looking, responsible strategies have to be developed for both the education and the training of young people, and here too we should seek international collaboration and consensus.

Permit me now to share some reflections with you, which start by my taking you back some eight years, to the 18th of September 1988 in Bologna, on the occasion when, as part of the celebrations to mark the eighth centenary of its university, a European Universities' "Magna Charta" was signed. This charter recorded the quintessence of European university culture as we understand it today — a culture rooted in the European tradition of higher education. Indeed, I shall take the liberty of quoting from a number of its clauses that may have a bearing on our work.

Before I do that, however, let me complement my earlier remarks by emphasizing — and this is of particular consequence for this meeting — that under the concept „Higher Education“ we must include all institutions of the tertiary education sector, whether their emphasis is on training in the vocational sense, or whether it is science-based education serving as a preparation for a vocation, or any form of continuing education. With this caveat in mind, let us consider in what way the Magna Charta might guide our thinking.

1. *"At the approaching end of this millennium the future of mankind will depend largely on cultural, scientific and technical development; and this is built up in centres of culture, of knowledge and research as represented by true universities."*
2. *"The universities' task of spreading knowledge among the young generations implies that, in today's world, they must also serve society as a whole; and that the cultural and economic future of society requires, in particular, a considerable investment in continuing education."*
3. *"Universities must give future generations education and training that will teach them, and through them others, to respect the great harmonies of their natural environment and of life itself."*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Does not this last paragraph set institutions of higher education, and hence ourselves as representatives of many of those institutions, a particular mandate?

But let me continue by quoting another passage, no less relevant to our deliberations:

4. *"Universities — particularly in Europe — regard the mutual exchange of information and documentation, and frequent joint projects for the advancement of learning, as essential to the steady progress of knowledge."*

And I close my citations with one further quotation from the Magna Charta — with the decision that the universities:

"... encourage mobility among teachers and students; furthermore, they consider a general policy of equivalent status, titles, examinations (without prejudice to national diplomas) and award of scholarships essential to the fulfilment of their mission in the conditions prevailing today."

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Colleagues from nearly all quarters of Europe,

This is more than a mandate. It is an obligation to seek a supra-national, a common approach in our education and training. It is a duty we cannot back away from, not least because it has not been imposed from outside by any political institution, but because it is self-imposed.

The document from which I have cited is not quite eight years old. Since that time, tremendous changes have transformed Europe. To highlight but two:

- With the collapse of communism, the principle of "freedom" has gradually begun to take hold almost everywhere in Europe;
- The European Union has concluded a significant expansion eastwards and northwards, and it is in the process of preparing itself for an even greater expansion.

These changes are transforming and will continue to transform Europe, both politically and economically. And these changes will not occur without leaving their mark on the education and training sectors, with a need not just for significant adjustment but also for new orientations, as I hinted earlier.

The developments in the sectors that have a bearing on the sphere of higher education that we term the agricultural and related sciences will be particularly dramatic. We must consider that, in the western systems of industrialized agriculture, only 2% of the population are responsible for all agricultural production. But the further eastwards we look in Europe, the greater the percentage of the population directly involved in

agricultural and forestry land use, reaching 20% and more. And if the number indirectly dependent are considered, this figure can be doubled.

I do not think that further data are necessary to illustrate the structural, technological, economic and social differences across Europe. Nor is it difficult to recognize the problems that will have to be faced as harmonization between the old and new members is being achieved — so that one will in truth be able to speak of a unified Europe.

We, whose responsibility it is to provide education, training and research in support of the sectors that will be so very directly affected, will have to shoulder our share of the burden. I am sure that with foresight and planning, and starting now, we can meet the challenges face to face.

Dear Friends,

I could perhaps now close. I have reminded you of the need for a collective approach in education and training throughout Europe, and even beyond. And it is equally clear that the need to implement this collective approach applies to education and training in the agricultural and related sciences as it does to all other areas. Yet I should like to devote a few more minutes to a further consideration of our area, focusing on a few selected aspects.

The conference that was held in Athens almost one year ago with the title "The Future of European Inter-University Cooperation in Agricultural Sciences" resulted in a two-volume document. It comprises a comparative compilation of the education and training systems in the agricultural science sector in the various EU countries and defines a number of perspectives and challenges. In the course of this conference, two aspects attracted my attention in particular.

During one of the plenary sessions, reflecting the markedly falling student numbers at agricultural science faculties and universities almost everywhere, it was possible to detect that the structural and ecological crisis affecting agricultural primary production had also caught up with the universities. It is not without good reason that, this very afternoon, the question of "Why should anyone study agricultural sciences?" is up for discussion.

This question has been relevant ever since agriculture came to be seen as the number one cause of every kind of ecological problem, and came to be a battleground for dramatic confrontations about the consequences of technologies that have exceptional socioeconomic impacts or that raise serious ethical issues. I again point to the current argument in relation to BSE or the bitter discussion that has developed in my country concerning the granting of permission for the planting of genetically modified crops, to mention only two of many issues.

At the same time, it appears to me that we lack the self-assurance to underpin the fact that, without a functioning agricultural sector and the other sectors that we include within the concept "agricultural and related sciences", our modern societies could not continue to function. Indeed, they could not even survive, a claim that could at best only be made for one other sector — the energy sector.

The sense of uncertainty about agricultural studies that forms the theme of this afternoon's discussion and whose ripples are touching us all cannot be banished by applying local, that is national policies. It is an international problem. It can, therefore, only be tackled on the basis of an international dialogue, while recognizing and allowing for regional differences. I do not wish to anticipate this afternoon's discussion and its outcome. However, could not our common model of higher education in the agricultural and related sciences — irrespective of which institution we each represent or from which corner of Europe we come — be formulated:

Higher education in the agricultural sciences has the task of providing its students with knowledge in such a form that they will afterwards be able to play a decisive role in maintaining the basic elements of life for coming generations.

Of course, I do not know, dear friends, whether you would agree with the tenor of my thoughts. However, through a large measure of continuing communication, through a regular exchange of ideas — in short, through a real attempt to find a collective approach, we might be able to establish a common model for European institutions of higher education in the area of the agricultural and the related sciences. Indeed, we should keep the discussion alive until a model is found on which we can base our collective way forward.

And, as part of this model, — and I should perhaps emphasize that this is a very personal belief — I suggest that we must support a further concern established in the Magna Charta: the indivisibility of teaching and research. Only with a strong "in-house" interaction between teaching and research can universities transfer knowledge so as to fairly represent the pressures and needs of society on the one hand and of science on the other.

I should also like to draw attention to a second aspect — and I beg your continuing indulgence, since this is for me, as an Austrian, of particular import. Last year in Athens, it was the EU countries, their institutions and their students that took centre stage. But there were present invited observers from countries who are not as yet member states of the European Union. The dramatic changes in central, east and south-east Europe that we have experienced in the past six years — and not all of these have been agreeable — have made us particularly aware that Europe is not merely composed of states represented by the circle of attractive golden stars on a dark-blue background.

It has become apparent to all of us that these countries are having to suffer periods of tremendous change — its processes affecting every sector and every aspect of life, not least their educational and training systems.

Indeed, in the area of agricultural sciences they are facing several types of systemic change simultaneously. As I already noted, in these new democracies agriculture and forestry and their related sectors face drastic structural upheavals. At the same time, their institutions of higher education are being re-formed from their foundations upwards. From reciprocal visits, we in Austria have recognized that these complex, protracted and exceptionally difficult transitions are not simply a question of budget or even political will in the respective countries or their institutions of higher education.

The European Union and many individual countries have provided more than moral support. The often already very satisfactorily advancing development has been significantly stimulated through the establishment of various joint programmes that assure mobility and exchange of teachers and students. Nevertheless, I believe that the expansion of the European Union that was consummated on 1 January 1995 has made even more obvious the need to provide greater support for existing developments in order to accelerate, strengthen and stabilize them. It is in this area that an international forum has a vital role to play — as a platform for communication, information, discussion and the designing new concepts, as a source of competent evaluation, and as a dynamic impulse-generator vis-à-vis political decision makers.

Thanks to many diverse initiatives in the area of education and research, and the until recently unimaginable level of communication, mobility and flow of information too has developed. The initiatives are found in various forms — supported by individuals, institutions and special interest groups. This has given rise to many different networks, some broad, some thematically focused, others geopolitically concentrated. In this context, the ERASMUS programme has become a milestone, its extent and its importance unparalleled. With the inception of SOCRATES, it even underwent a qualitative and quantitative improvement. Without doubt, they are great achievements of the European Union, not least because their boundaries extend beyond the boundaries of the Union, indeed beyond those of Europe.

However, the qualitative and quantitative diversity of the various initiatives brings the problem that they do not communicate with each other, let alone coordinate their actions. We can see how important such communication might be when a partner that is fortuitously a member of two such initiatives sometimes plays a coordinating role. It is then that one recognizes that how much coordination could improve the impact of the available resources.

The thought is awakened in me that this meeting — this common platform — might forge the necessary linkages in order to achieve synergies. Synergies through communication and coordination could well (especially in view of the mass of programmes within the framework of SOCRATES) lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness, and thereby benefit us all.

Finally, let us not forget that a truly collective approach must also encompass the institutions in those countries that are not as yet members of the European Union, but that belong to that "whole Europe" that we should appreciate in terms of its diversity as well as its "oneness". Despite all the geographical, historical and cultural differences, despite different economic and social conditions, and despite, too, the regional particularities, it must be clear to us that there is truly only one Europe. This is a Europe much larger and more complex than we are often prepared to recognize from a "Brussels" perspective. And to no area within the educational and training sector do the attributes "large, complex and diverse" fit so well as to agricultural science in its broadest sense.

We must use the chance offered by these two days to establish a forum that will accommodate the very broad spectrum of matters that must be considered under the heading of the agricultural and related sciences. Facing the problems and perspectives of Europe as they impact on higher education in the agricultural and related sciences needs a great sense of community and collective endeavour. Not least, this will go some way towards tackling our share of the tasks the European universities set themselves in the "mission statement" of their Magna Charta from which I cited earlier. In the course of this meeting, we have the chance to set milestones for the future development of that field of knowledge in which we work. I believe that we owe it to our institutions, our countries and to the international community to achieve a good measure of success.

In this endeavour, we have the advantage that we are able to build on a "foundation" prepared by the Interfaculty Committee Agraria, set out in the document we all received together with our invitation to this Conference. The document is both a stock-taking and a basis for discussion and provides the basis of a rationale for a collective approach, for the creation of a platform organization. Clearly, the Preparatory Committee does not wish it to be seen in any way as pre-empting outcomes or recommendations that this meeting will be developing, as my speech should not present a prepared strategy, but stimulate discussion.

I look forward to the deliberations we shall share together in the two days we have at our disposal, and I am sure that we shall be able to return to our institutions with practical and valuable initiatives which can be developed further to meet future challenges.