

Speech at the European Students Convention, March 17th 2012. By Rector Ralf Hemmingsen.

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Dear students.

Welcome you to the University of Copenhagen!

Those of you who arrived early in Copenhagen and went on the visit to the Freetown Christiania might have noticed the inscription at the gate when leaving again:

It says “You are now entering the European Union”!

But even Christiania must admit that what happens in Europe and in the European Union matters a lot. And a lot is happening.

The fact that Europe is a vibrant continent for better and worse is not a new phenomenon. University of Copenhagen has through its history always been interconnected with its European surroundings.

In fact right from the beginning. Before the Danish King was allowed to found the university in 1479, permission had to be collected from the Pope in Rome.

And due to the less developed transport infrastructures back then – it took a while before idea became reality.

It has never been easy to run universities!

The European context is as we all now preeminent today.

The financial and economic crisis that Europe faces is severe.

Everybody is faced with a change of game. Credit is scarcer. Public funding is under pressure. Job opportunities are worse than they used to be – also for university graduates.

In Denmark the unemployment rate for graduates who graduated less than a year ago is 25 %

And the situation is even worse in many other countries.

In Spain the situation is dire and has even triggered a new wave of emigration so that The Guardian could report last year that [and I quote] “Emerging economies such as Brazil and other Latin American countries are also seeing more Spaniards arriving.”

We have had a debate on whether new graduates should apply for a jobs in the super markets or other so called McJobs - which are not that easy to get either.

A part from the fact that there is nothing wrong with jobs in a super market or the like – it is bad use of a university degree.

However, question of unemployment for graduates that left university 3 month ago and yesterday is of course distinct from which measures can help dragging us out of the crisis in the medium and long run.

The short term unemployment problem is serious and effects lives and careers of the individuals that cannot find a suitable job - just as it's an economic loss for the entire society.

The solution to this problem depends on how fast the recovery is underway and the direct measures are mainly a political question.

But from then on: What can universities and students do to improve what we do and thereby help dragging Europe out of the crisis?

First of all, the precondition: it's important to communicate that universities and graduates are wealth creators – and will increasingly be so in an environment where knowledge, technology and information are increasingly important.

Our data show all categories of graduates contribute positively to productivity. In Danish companies an employee with a graduate degree creates value equal to around two persons without a degree of higher education

DATA also indicates that if we look ahead, the demand of people with academic skill will be greater than the supply.

Therefore I have no doubt that research and education will have a vital role to play in recovery and new economic growth in Denmark as well as in Europe in general.

Think of the grand challenges related to health care and climate change where solutions and further development are highly knowledge based.

We and most other European universities are matriculating students in greater and greater numbers while expectations from our stakeholders increase as well.

Therefore: We have to do more without delivering less!

So the challenge requires that both students and universities get on the job.

Students should consider their choice of study and its components even more carefully in regard to employability.

Universities should provide more flexication!

- First –studying more flexible: Better access to studying across disciplines and access to more comprehensive supervision: That is guidance about what to do while studying and

guidance about what to do after graduating. Mentor programmes with companies which we have also introduced here is an example of the latter.

- Second: A flexible approach to talent: – talent is not only related to a research career but also for example to entrepreneurial spirit. Therefore we should widen the arena for innovation and start-up environments linked to universities.
- And finally third – flexication when it comes to crossing borders: We should encourage studying a semester or more abroad and adapt educational programmes likewise.

It is vital for us - just like every other country - that Europe is internally connected. And I think that besides the great task of dragging Europe out of her current crisis – students also play a cultural and historical role as a part of the glue that tie us together.

Therefore I hope that Erasmus programme will come out even stronger as Erasmus for All.

Visiting students and students who go abroad become ambassadors for both their native universities and countries as well as for the places they go.

Just as we value visiting students at the University of Copenhagen and we hope also to attract more and more full degree students.

The Bologna process is – a process – but has contributed to more transparency and comparability in the different higher education systems. And with the focus on mobility we hope to receive even more of you and your fellow students here in the coming years...

To sum up – I think there is plenty we can do ourselves and I am confident that science and education is one of the main answer to this current crisis.

Our effort to adapt ourselves should go along with an ongoing debate on the legal frameworks both national and European, on how to financing universities and what do about the current problem with graduate employability.

You have put together a constructive agenda that includes both dimensions.

Therefore I would like to thank the European Students Union for choosing highly relevant and important theme for this convention.

Thanks to DSF for being able to bring so many active students from so many European countries together! And I am looking forward to hearing the outcome of your discussions and your final declaration.

I have heard that the representatives from Ireland are not here partly due to Saint Patricks Day. Saint Patricks Day is by the way is also celebrated in Copenhagen! But what ever you choose as theme for the social part of the convention: I wish you all a good time together in Copenhagen!

Thank you!

