

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Promoting education and culture as priority policies for the EU

EP Culture Committee

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Speaking points

Honourable members,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

[Greetings].

The policies included in my—I should say *our*—portfolio have taken centre stage among the priorities of the EU over the past five years.

I am thinking of our policies on learning, of course, with their link to our strategy designed to build a genuine knowledge economy and society in Europe.

But I'm also thinking of culture, youth, sport and citizenship, with their unique capacity to bring the Union close to our fellow European citizens.

In my work as Commissioner, I've kept a constant focus on one objective: building up Europe's human potential.

The reason is simple: our capacity to adapt—and lead—in the age of knowledge and globalisation ultimately depends on our people.

What the people know and what they can do with their knowledge is also crucial for the social cohesion of Europe.

This approach requires a lot of patience because, as always in our policies, immediate benefits are rare; we all work for the long-term.

But this time frame has given me a stronger sense of urgency, because if we don't plant the seed now, the tree will never grow tall and strong.

I have worked together with the European Parliament in each of these domains and I am pleased to say that our cooperation has been consistently respectful and constructive.

I am particularly grateful for your support when it came to discussing the budget for our policies. Thanks to your help, we could not only maintain but increase the funds we had asked for.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

What have we done together for our fellow Europeans?

EIT

The European Institute of Innovation and Technology ranks among the most important achievements.

The EIT is the first European initiative that embodies the three sides of the knowledge triangle—education, research and innovation—and a new form of partnership between public and private organisations.

Based on the Knowledge and Innovation Communities, the EIT will focus on strategic areas for Europe, such as sustainable energy, climate change and the next generation of information and communication technologies.

The Institute is off to a good start under the guidance of its chairman, Mr Schuurmans. I have no doubt it will become a world-class reference model.

Lifelong learning

I believe the EIT will inspire change among centres of learning and research, so let us review our main achievements in education and training.

During my mandate, I have tried to open a space for dialogue and partnership with Member States and other education stakeholders with the goal of modernising learning systems across Europe.

This is a lofty ideal, but it can become a reality only through practical tools, such as EQF, ECTS, ECVET—all created with your support.

These tools, apart from being something of an alphabet soup, allow learners, employers and institutions to understand the outcomes of learning, irrespective of where and in what form it takes place.

The number one success in this domain is without a doubt the Erasmus programme, the best-known programme of the EU and a by-word for Europe for many fellow citizens.

Thanks to Erasmus we now have the first truly European generation. And with the development of Comenius Regio, which Mrs Pack has so strongly supported, we will soon have in place a stronger basis for cooperation between school administrations in border regions.

It is thanks to these humble tools and to Erasmus, Comenius, Leonardo and Grundtvig, that we are creating a genuinely European Area for Lifelong Learning.

And judging by the interest our policies are attracting internationally, I should say we are doing a pretty good job.

Our support to mobility, our qualifications frameworks, and the spirit behind the Bologna process are praised and replicated throughout the world.

The Commission is keeping its doors open to the wider world, for instance through the Tempus programme which helps our neighbourhood partners restructure their higher-education systems.

Another tool for international cooperation is Erasmus Mundus, for which we have now launched the second phase with your support, broadening it to cover doctoral programmes.

Erasmus Mundus may be the little brother of Erasmus in financial terms, but it can do a lot to make Europe a more attractive destination for international students.

It is interesting to see that Europe has now overtaken the US as the favourite destination in terms of numbers of students.

European Years

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We have worked together on four European Years during our mandates: 2004 for Education through Sport, 2008 for Intercultural Dialogue, the current year for Creativity and Innovation, and the European Year of Volunteering planned for 2011. Let me say a few words on 2009 and 2008.

Creativity and Innovation

First of all, I would like to thank you and Mrs Batzeli for your cooperation in helping our proposal to devote 2009 to creativity and innovation materialise in time.

Creativity and innovation are already important for our economies and societies. They will be even more prominent in the future because they will drive growth and jobs.

Culture is a significant industry in its own right. There are more people employed in the cultural industries across the EU than workers in all sectors in Greece and Ireland combined.

Our discussion at the Plenary last week highlighted the importance of culture in regional policies and the scope for doing more in this area.

But the European Year is also about helping people fulfil their personal creative potential. So, in 2009 we are looking at social well-being and personal fulfilment, as well as at economic growth.

Intercultural Dialogue

As to last year, let me remind you that intercultural dialogue is the first pillar of our agenda for culture. Europeans are learning to cope with growing diversity in their cities and regions.

This is why we put mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue on the table with the European Year.

The momentum we created during the year will help us strengthen our actions in the Culture Programme and in our political dialogue with the Member States and stakeholders.

Let me thank particularly Mrs Hennicot–Schoepges for all her efforts and contributions in this area.

European Agenda for Culture

I have just mentioned the European Agenda for Culture, which is another major achievement of our work together. For the first time ever the Union has a comprehensive European strategy for culture.

Politically, our agenda reinforces our commitment to cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, and the role of culture as a catalyst for creativity.

Practically, we can now develop stronger cultural relations with our partners across the world. I am thinking in particular of our work in the framework of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Culture Expressions.

Why do I think this is important? Because culture must be brought closer to the centre of the policies of the Union.

Europe is much more than an internal market; it is above all a social and cultural project based on the values we share such as tolerance, democracy and freedom.

Last week I participated in the Parliament's debate on the remembrance of totalitarianism, which has a particular meaning for those of us who joined in 2004.

I have the hope that through our shared efforts, the 21st century can be a more human century than the last one.

Youth, Sport and Citizenship

As to the other policies included in my portfolio, let me focus briefly on youth, sport and citizenship.

Many of our policies and programmes have an impact on young people, but we have also seen important developments in our specific policies for young people. I particularly appreciated your initiative to host the European Youth Week last year.

The political framework for cooperation has already helped to reinforce the position of youth policies in the Member States, but after seven years of cooperation, there is now scope to sharpen and deepen our work.

As for sport, our White Paper of 2007 complemented by the Pierre de Coubertin action plan was the first EU document explicitly and exclusively devoted to sport, covering the social role, the economic implications, and the organisation of sport in Europe. Let me thank here Mr. Mavrommatis for the excellent cooperation.

We are now well on the way to implementing these actions, as we discussed at the Plenary last week on the basis of Mrs Batzeli's oral question. The Reform Treaty will help us to put our cooperation on these issues on a more solid basis.

Finally, let us not forget our support for civil–society organisations in their efforts to have an active role in the development of the European Union. It is crucial for our process of integration that our citizens acquire a sense of European identity; and this is why we have been promoting democratic participation in the life of the Union.

Future challenges

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to conclude with some thoughts on the future.

The EIT is poised to become a world leader in areas of strategic importance for the EU. The challenge will be to ensure that it secures private investment above and beyond what it receives from the Community budget. The economic crisis means that we must redouble our efforts.

The crisis also threatens public–sector budgets across the world. The Commission’s message is clear: we must not just maintain education budgets, we must increase them. And we must get the best value out of our education and training systems.

I also hope the European Year of Creativity and Innovation can help shape our policy agenda, especially in education and training, for many years to come.

Finally, greater diversity and economic pressure will continue to challenge the cohesion of all our societies. We must respond by emphasising our shared values, by promoting mobility and by supporting intercultural dialogue.

I hope we will soon see a phase of more action. We need to make things happen—especially in our learning systems—because this is what citizens expect of us.

But above all, I would be happy if the future recognises our efforts to build an environment of trust among all the stakeholders involved in our policies—in education and beyond.

Trust is by far the most important factor for the integration of education and culture policies across Europe.

I have seen this very clearly since the beginning of my mandate and we have all worked hard to bring mutual knowledge, transparency and trust into the system.

I am optimistic by nature and I am convinced that if we keep together and do not falter in our determination, we can meet these challenges head on.

Thank you.