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**Europe needs more graduates and  
high-level skills**

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

The Bologna Ministerial Conference

**Bucharest, 26 April 2012**

*Speech delivered by Xavier Prats Monné, Deputy-Director General, Education and Culture Directorate-General, European Commission*

Dear Ministers, colleagues and friends,

It is an honour for me to open this conference.

First of all, like my colleagues before me, let me thank our Romanian hosts for organising this global event in the field of education. And let me also thank the Danish and Azeri co-chairs and the Bologna Secretariat for preparing this conference. Their work means we are well placed to discuss the progress of the European Higher Education Area and the steps to take until 2015 to make the Area an even greater success.

This conference takes place at difficult time for Europe. Europe is in crisis, economically, financially, socially. Unemployment has reached record levels in many parts of the continent, and youth unemployment is a particular concern.

In these difficult times, it is vital that we as politicians at all levels take a long-term perspective. As policy-makers in education we must collectively articulate our shared conviction that education is key for recovery and sustainable growth. We must ensure that our collective effort is also heard by Ministers of Finance. And, I am aware that sometimes they are rather hard of hearing.

For me, this conference is the opportunity to renew our collective commitment – as governments, higher education institutions and students – to completing the European Higher Education Area. And let me stress that the European Commission will continue to play its part in turning the political vision of the European Higher Education Area into reality.

Why do we as Commission feel such a strong commitment? Because for us the Bologna Process, with its instruments and goals, is not isolated from our own priorities.

The Process is intertwined with the EU's own modernisation agenda for higher education, clearly helping to achieve the Union's policy objectives. Our programmes, such as Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus, underpin the pursuit of such goals and contribute to driving reform efforts. 'Erasmus for All' – the new programme I proposed at the end of last year will support education and training even more effectively from 2014 onwards, and it will also enhance the international dimension of education.

Why is it so important that we support Bologna goals with our collective commitment?

First, Europe needs, especially today but also for the future, high-level skills. We also need more graduates. Future jobs are going to require people with skills adapted to the needs of the evolved knowledge based society and economy. If we want to be competitive on the global stage, we need to pursue a common agenda to implement the full range of reforms that will enable us to compete in the global scene.

This is the impetus at the heart of the European Union's Europe 2020 strategy. It is vital for the economic regeneration and social sustainability of the wider continent of Europe. Our citizens must be able to develop their potential if our societies are to reach theirs.

As set out in the EU agenda for the modernisation of higher education, we must all play our full part in this process of change. At EU level, we can provide a clear added value by supporting learning mobility, cooperation for innovation and good practice, as well as support to national reforms.

Governments and higher education institutions need to do more to support students to acquire the knowledge and develop the right blend of skills they need to succeed in the world of work.

Europe's higher education institutions have a great tradition of helping individuals to develop critical and inquisitive mind-sets, and fostering the acquisition of new scientific knowledge.

Strengthening cooperation between education and the world of work and innovation can deepen the gains for our students, bringing new perspectives to education programmes and help improve the employability of graduates.

We need to pay more attention to what happens to our students once they graduate, and use that knowledge to keep improving our education offer.

And we need to develop transparency and information about our universities and colleges, helping students to make the best possible choices, and enabling institutions to recognise and build on their strengths.

Dear colleagues,

We also need to strengthen our efforts on recognition of diplomas. As we all know, this is still problematic, even though it is a core goal of the European Higher Education Area. To meet this challenge, I believe that we should set ourselves the goal of working towards automatic recognition of diplomas. I know this is complex, and will take some time. But the Commission is willing to support countries that wish to work together, making better use of existing tools to make recognition and mobility easier.

The Bologna Process, and the EU's modernisation agenda, provide the frameworks for our common efforts to reform and modernise our higher education systems. We now need to ensure that our efforts deliver real benefits on the ground, to students, to staff, to the economy and to society more widely.

We must strive for continued improvement in quality, stimulate mobility, and ensure the higher education we offer is relevant for our labour markets. Above all we must significantly develop opportunities for greater numbers of students to access higher education of the highest quality.

The road laid down in the Bucharest Ministerial Communiqué needs to be followed throughout the European Higher Education Area. I look forward to accompanying you on this path.

Thank you.