

## **EHEA conference**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to speak at this very important conference concerning our place as a higher education sector within the wider context of the Bologna process. This afternoon, I wish to make three sets of observations.

They are:

- Some remarks around the practices connected with the Bologna process;
- The work that we must do to promote Europe as an exciting and worthwhile venue for our own students to study; and
- The nature of European students', and their impact on home students' learning experiences.

First, let me turn to the Bologna process and its structures itself. As all of us will be aware, many of the developments that we accept as second nature within Scottish higher education are leading the way in Europe. Most importantly, our emphasis on a learner-centred institution is a helpful

overarching concept. Our Scottish credit and qualifications framework places learners and their learning outcomes centre stage by making this the building block of credit. Our review methodology and quality framework explicitly state that it is the quality of the learning experience which we are trying to measure. Our emphasis on students as co-creators of their learning and therefore their joint responsibilities on the management of quality within our institutions leads the way in Europe.

In this regard, we have much to be proud of within Europe, and a role to play in helping other nations shape their own higher education systems in a learner-centred mould. As the Scottish Government develops our international strategy, we should bear in mind this aspect of promoting Scottish higher education. Speaking personally, I'm not sure that we are devoting enough energy and resource into celebrating, on the international stage, the advanced nature of our systems. One only has to take a mere glance at the most recent stock-taking report produced for the Bologna process to see how far ahead of other countries our sector is. Over the next year, and especially as we implement the recent joint quality review sponsored by the Funding Council, we must develop

a clear, coherent and properly resourced approach to promoting what we have achieved here in Scotland over the last five or six years to the rest of Europe. Too often, much of our work promoting our system and sector is the added extra as opposed to one of the essential things we should be doing. For our own part, NUS Scotland must take a more pro-active role with our own European students union. I am happy to announce that over the last few weeks, NUS Scotland has been working with the Scottish Government on ways to engage students more in the Bologna process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area, including

- Engaging fully in discussions in Europe from a Scottish learner perspective;
- Providing a knowledge-base within NUS Scotland on developments in Europe; and
- Raising awareness of the Bologna process amongst students and encouraging Scottish students to consider studying abroad.

At NUS Scotland, we very much hope that this means over the next year or two, we can supplement the voice of our colleagues within institutions, QAA Scotland and Universities

Scotland in promoting our jointly held vision of a learner-centred European Higher Education Area.

Not only do we have a role in proactively promoting our achievements in Europe, but there are also valuable opportunities for us to learn from other European nations and developments for Scotland. The joint quality review has suggested that one of our high-level principles of quality enhancement should be the embedding of a quality culture within our sector and institutions. We can learn much from the European Universities Association's recent development project on building such quality cultures. Likewise it has also been suggested that we should investigate the benchmarking of our own approaches to higher education with those adopted by other nations' sectors. While it is often easiest to examine approaches developed by those that share our lingua franca, increasing the structures and aims of European countries higher education systems will be closer to ours. While, due to language barriers, it will be harder to undertake this work with our European neighbours it potentially could be a much richer source of information. One of the best examples of this that comes to mind is that of student involvement. In the first instance we have much

to tell European universities – including those in England – regarding student involvement, but we also, especially from Scandinavian approaches to involving students, have much to learn and thereby enrich our own means by which we engage students in the learning and the management of quality.

Not only do we need to promote our system more in Europe; we also need to promote the attractions of European study to our own students within Scotland. This takes me to the second theme of my remarks. As many of us will be aware, the numbers of Scottish students engaging in a period of study at a European university has declined, and in comparison with our nearest neighbour, England, the proportions of our students engaging in such exchanges is much smaller. We must be resolute. Attending a period of study out with your own institution and out with your own home country has huge advantages for the individual. Many of our outcomes of what it is to study higher education are based around ideas of a wider and greater appreciation of the society we live in and the values we hold dear to ourselves. As anyone who has stayed in another country for a longer period of time will be aware, exposure to different

ways of life enriches our own understanding of where we have come from. Increasingly within a globalised economy, such appreciation and the skills that go with it will be at a premium. I believe that tomorrow's highly skilled graduates will need to be equipped with the skills to operate in different cultures. Not only therefore are the benefits of such schemes as the Erasmus exchange programme personally derived, there will also be significant benefits to the Scottish economy. As the Scottish Government takes forward its skills strategy, we must ensure that consideration is given to this agenda.

We must also consider the benefits to students and, if captured adequately, to our institutions, from the changed perceptions of students on their own learning experiences and their subsequent expectations of their learning as a result of spending time in another institution, in another country. Student expectations play an important role in the ability of students to adequately articulate and reflect on how they would like to see their own learning experience.

There will be those that say increasing the numbers of Scottish students engaging in European exchanges will be

difficult. There are good reasons for such caution. Firstly, our student support systems more-or-less rely upon the assumption that students will work at least part-time, while they study full-time. Clearly this acts as a disincentive to studying abroad when it may be significantly harder to get part-time employment in another country and on return to Scotland to find another part-time job. We need to look to the Scottish Government to invest more in appropriately facilitating and resourcing Scottish students' engagement with our European cousins. This is to ensure that our concerns over inclusion and widening access are also a reality to access to European educational experiences: it is an imperative that schemes like the Erasmus exchange programme are not another way for class barriers to re-entrench themselves through exclusive use by members of the middle class. Another presumed reason why students from Scotland may not engage in European exchanges is due to poor language skills. Aside from the fact that many courses in European universities are actually taught in English; perhaps there is more that institutions can do to provide language courses in the early years of an honours degree. With this in mind, it is worth noting that in many American liberal arts colleges and universities there is a

requirement to undertake study in a modern language before graduation. Evidence suggests that many students would not do this by choice (hence, presumably the compulsory nature of the course) however it is a course that many students name as having amongst the greatest impacts on their development as individuals. When we talk about enhancing the curriculum and internationalising the curriculum, perhaps we need to bear this point in mind. Overall, as a sector and as institutions we need to do more to promote the benefits of participating in European exchanges to our student body.

Finally, let me turn to the third theme of my remarks: how we respond to the needs of European students within our institutions. Over the last couple of academic sessions, we have started as a sector to think through the challenges of internationalising our curriculum. In other words what is it that we can do as teachers and lecturers to enable access to our teaching and learning materials. This work is valuable and projects such as that currently being undertaken by the Higher Education Academy deserve our full support. Many of our campuses have international offices that support students from overseas while they study. However, many students who come to study in Scotland face similar barriers

to those faced by our own students when considering studying in Europe. The most common concerns that international student's raise with NUS Scotland are lack of financial support, language barriers and differences in academic assessment standards. More support is needed for students visiting from other countries to ensure that they are able to have a standard of living comparable to the level of Scottish students, that they are given access to any language development courses that they need and that the standards of academic assessment, including plagiarism, are clearly set out and understanding of them is checked.

Not only is it appropriate to offer dedicated and specialised support to students coming from other European countries to Scotland but there is also a requirement for us to integrate the international student experience with our home students' experiences. The benefits of this integrated approach would be felt and should be conceived of as impacting equally upon home and international students. On many campuses we see many international students – European students amongst them – segregated into national communities (segregated is a strong word, but I think I use it appropriately) into national groupings. One of the benefits,

as we've acknowledged earlier of European exchange programmes is to enrich and to explore different cultures. This can be achieved by internationalising the curriculum but it must also be achieved by internationalising the wider experience. We must do more to ensure that the informal learning through co-curricular activities as well as the formal learning brings together international, European and home students together so they can share experiences and learn together. This is particularly important when we consider that the number of Scottish students going to European universities has declines. For those students who cannot, for whatever reason, engage in a European exchange programme, we should consider how incoming students from Europe can shape and change the attitudes and learning experiences of our home students.

Quite unlike my own experience, whereby the international students, from day one, all sat at the front of the classroom, while the home students instinctively sat at the back whilst the halls of residence were equally separated. If something as simple as to challenge these seating and living arrangements had been done, I am sure that all of our learning experiences would have been richer as a result.

This afternoon, I acknowledge I have given a number of challenges for us to consider. I have suggested we must do more, and more must mean strategically and systematically, to promote our understanding of a student-centred European Higher Education Area. Crucially, this emphasis on a student centred higher education sector must mean the Europe and the Bologna process are not structures and systems but things that actually matter and count for something within the student experience. In this regard, the challenges I have outlined are more complex:

- We must link the importance and value of European exchange programmes to our skills strategy that envisioned highly skilled graduates who are mobile in a globalised economy;
- In doing so, we must prioritise extra funding for students to go on European exchange programmes and we must do more to research and articulate the value added for and to students in attending these exchange programmes;
- We must do more to integrate the experience of students coming from Europe to study in our campuses,

more to support their needs but also to provide opportunities, formal and informal, for European and Scottish students to learn from one-another

I have greatly enjoyed the conference so far, and I am sure, like you, look forward to exploring these issues further in this afternoon's discussions. Thank you for your time.

---

Duncan to add something about learning experience bit  
Making sure they are advertised appropriately and creatively

Halls setup?

Why do we have international socs?