

## Message of Greeting

by the Minister for Science and Research

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marking the opening of the Münster Conference

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It is almost exactly 355 years since the Treaty of Westphalia was concluded in Münster. It represented the culmination of the first big conference of the European powers of the time, and created the basis for an order of freedom without comparison. Its principles are valid to this day.

Those powers have now become nation states, united by the vision of a common Europe. The new constitution of the European Union will satisfy the demands for a common approach to domestic and foreign policy. The process of globalisation can only be structured through a collective approach by the European states.

At the time of the Thirty Years' War, the arts and the sciences already transcended religious and territorial boundaries. The desire of the sciences for freedom from political and normative interference was already discernible. What constituted brave reaching out then, is today enshrined in the constitutions of Europe.

Academia and scientific research can only fully evolve if their freedom is guaranteed, and scientists can interact across boundaries. There has been a virtual unity of the sciences and the humanities in Europe for a long time: academics in scientific communities use the internet to communicate with their colleagues, they publish their work in jointly edited journals and meet at international conferences and symposiums. All that counts there is the quality of their contributions.

Nonetheless, these scientific communities, which have long existed in every academic discipline, are embedded in national higher education structures which are still distinct from one another. There are historical reasons for this. The traditions of the European member

states still determine whether a university is publicly or privately funded, the specialisation of its degrees, and whether research is centrally organised or divided into smaller units.

These differing traditions are at odds with the European Union's declared aim of creating more homogenous and comparable standards. Even now, non-comparable degrees, and the range of subject areas within them, inhibit smooth transfers to universities abroad. Luckily, these barriers are constantly being reduced by the ongoing Bologna Process.

With its declaration on "The Role of the Universities in a Knowledge-based Europe", the European Commission has provided a vital impetus for higher education reform in Europe. At the Bologna follow-up conference in Berlin on 19. September 2003, the education ministers of the European Higher Education Area stated that a university education constitutes a public good, and that the responsibility for it should lie with the respective member states. Specific measures were also agreed upon. These include the establishment of a system of quality assurance, the accelerated introduction of bachelor and masters degrees until 2005 and the further improvement in the mutual recognition of academic degrees and qualifications.

The Joint Declaration signed today improves the preconditions for an intensive exchange of experience. May today's conference advance this cooperation with specific suggestions and concepts.

I hope this conference will produce constructive and creative cooperation for all those involved, and that this will serve as a role model not only in this region but across Europe. The historic location at which we agree upon our cooperation encourages me to hope that this will happen. I urgently appeal to all the academics in the universities of our countries to use their powers to fill this Joint Declaration signed today, with life.