

Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn
Keynote Speech at the "Excellence 2012 Conference"
Aarhus, 19 April 2012

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you today. You have put together a very interesting programme with many world-renowned speakers, so I really regret that I am not able to be with you in person.

The timing of this conference is perfect. It is vital that the idea of "excellence", which I believe is so important to our future, is more widely understood and promoted.

My hope is that the Danish Presidency in 2012 will be able to give the same political momentum to stimulating excellence, as it did in 2002 to creating the European Research Council.

The ERC has been a tremendous success. Not least because it is built from top to bottom around the idea of excellence. There are many lessons we can take from it.

After I became Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science I saw that the EU had many great initiatives supporting research and innovation. But I quickly realised that we could achieve more by bringing these together. By concentrating on areas with clear European added value. By rationalising our objectives. By focusing resources. And just as importantly, by simplifying our programmes and instruments.

That is why Horizon 2020 – the new European programme for research and innovation - will be built around three distinct, yet mutually reinforcing, priorities: excellent science, industrial leadership, and societal challenges.

We aim to speed up development of the technologies and innovations that will underpin tomorrow's businesses and help innovative European SMEs to grow into world leading companies.

We will respond directly to the policy priorities and societal challenges identified in the Europe 2020 strategy and stimulate the critical mass of research and innovation efforts needed to achieve the Union's policy goals.

But underpinning all these efforts, will be the first pillar of Horizon 2020, **Excellent Science**. Excellent Science provides the bedrock of our future growth and wellbeing. It is therefore a great pleasure for me to focus my speech today on "Excellence in European Research".

So what does it mean to support excellent science? You would think that nobody could object to supporting excellence. But I have come to realise that excellence means different things to different people. When some people hear "supporting excellence" they misguidedly think "funding

academic indulgence". What about the pressing challenges facing society!? What about the economic crisis!?

When others hear about "supporting excellence" they think of "funding the elite at the expense of everyone else". What about using Europe's full potential!? What about capacity building!?

I am a very practical person. I came into politics to get things done. What I am passionate about is improving the lives of people in Europe, helping to create a sustainable future, and helping to build competitive industries that are able to create jobs.

So it would be great if we could simply assign scientists to particular problems and expect them to provide solutions within tight deadlines. Unfortunately it doesn't work like that. The record of big top-down initiatives to tackle specific challenges is rather mixed.

And that is why I support excellent science 100%. There is no contradiction with wanting results. Because history has proven time and again that the best way of achieving the breakthroughs that we need is to provide resources to the best scientists with the best ideas.

Ultimately that's all that excellence means. It means awarding funding and academic positions on scientific merit. Not because someone has the right political connections or is pursuing a fashionable research goal. Not because someone is the most senior or has the "right" nationality, or because it is "their turn". But awarding on merit.

And we need more excellent research. The EU produces more scientific output than any other region in the world. But it has fallen behind in producing the very best cutting-edge science in new and rapidly-emerging fields that are closely associated with world-leading innovation. We have sufficient quantity but not enough quality. Similarly, international rankings of universities and other research organisations show that US based organisations dominate the top places.

So we need to support our best researchers and best institutions because they are in a global competition with better resourced rivals and with new rivals emerging every day. To be able to do so, we must invest in higher education and basic research, both at national and European level. We must create a research environment where excellent ideas can flourish and where our top researchers are able to work, share and benefit from each other.

The research landscape is not flat – peaks of excellence can spring up anywhere. But excellence cannot be everywhere. This is as true for regions, institutions and individuals within countries as it is between countries. But this does not mean that we should have only a few centres of excellence that grow at the expense of others.

So it is crucial to recognise that excellence doesn't develop on its own. It requires nurturing and resources. And that is why we are supporting capacity-building with massive investment from the cohesion funds.

Between 2007 and 2014, for every euro spent by the ERC, we forecast that the cohesion funds will invest at least another ten euro supporting research and innovation in cohesion regions. In addition, I have been working hard with my colleagues to ensure that Horizon 2020 and cohesion funds will work together more seamlessly in future.

But more than resources, excellence requires the right philosophy; a commitment to reform; a willingness to identify particular strengths and opportunities that may mean difficult choices as part of a "smart specialisation" strategy. Excellence also requires a willingness to work to build up the right conditions and practices over many years. That is why, by exploring and setting out these conditions, the declaration from this conference is so timely.

Our ambition is to raise the level of excellence in Europe's science base. To ensure a steady stream of world-class research. And to secure Europe's long-term competitiveness. So we will support the best ideas, develop talent within Europe, provide researchers with access to priority research infrastructure, and make Europe an attractive location for the world's best researchers.

To be clear: the conflict between excellence and innovation claimed by some people is largely artificial. Excellent research and innovation have a symbiotic relation: they are part of each other and they need each other. Innovation is not necessarily linked only to short-term applied research, it is intrinsic to excellent research that needs to be hungry for new ideas, exploring new frontiers, and thinking out-of-the box.

At the same time, scientific breakthroughs, no matter how far from pre-conceived applications, need to be turned into excellent innovative solutions to generate social value and economic impact, to lead to growth, more jobs and better living standards, to successfully tackle the societal challenges Europe is facing. This is the philosophy behind Horizon 2020.

Europe's current crisis is a debt crisis, a financial crisis, but above all, it's a growth crisis. The old recipes just aren't working any more. That is why research and innovation policy are at the heart of Europe's fight for jobs and prosperity - and at the heart of research and innovation policy must be excellence.

I hope that the declaration from this conference will give that message loud and clear.

Thank you.