

Things Need to be Set in Motion in Order to Free up Intellectual Potential

By Boris Čerin

This is of course something that we hear quite frequently. More interesting, however, is the fact that this is something we say in two totally contrasting situations: when we are successful in a project, to confirm our satisfaction at our success, or to emphasise the importance of our contribution, but also in the opposite situation, when we are unsuccessful in a project. In the latter case, of course, as an excuse for the fact that we ran out of steam, that although we did our best, it wasn't quite enough. The same words pronounced with a different intonation. Be that as it may, the need to set things in motion remains in the foreground. And this of course raises a question: how successful are we at this in Slovenia? More precisely, in the sphere of higher education, science and technology? We talked to the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Mojca Kucler Dolinar.

QUARK: *You are the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology at the time of Slovenia's Presidency of the EU, which means a lot more meetings at the international level. Before being appointed Minister you spent three years as a Member of the Slovenian Parliament. The National Assembly first appointed you chair of the Internal Policy, Public Administration and Justice Committee and then made you a member of the Slovenian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. You have also been a regular participant at conferences called by the British Council. Has all of this helped you get used to making public appearances as a minister, or do you attribute your rhetorical skills more to your previous career, given that you are a lawyer by training?*

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: It is probably a combination of everything. I certainly try to make use of the experience I have gained in my past work in everything I do, and that also applies to my job as minister. It is true that as a lawyer I need rhetorical skills. For this reason

I don't have any particular difficulties with public speaking.

QUARK: *Your predecessor at the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology was Dr Jure Zupan, who was himself a scientist with many years of experience and also a university professor. In view of the fact that you are members of the same party, would it be fair to say that there have been few personnel changes since your arrival? What is your opinion of your current team? Can you rely on them?*

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: The work of a minister cannot be a solo performance by an individual. Rather, it is the fruit of the hard and responsible work of the whole team. I am very happy with my team and together we are implementing a number of projects both at home in Slovenia and in connection with the Presidency of the Council of the EU. I should also mention the excellent work being done by our ministry in the context of Slovenia's one-year presidency of the international EUREKA programme of industrial research.

QUARK: *The job of the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology requires you to work in two directions. On the one hand there are the efforts to provide financing for research and development activities from the national budget. In Slovenia these efforts need to be directed a little more towards increasing the percentage of funds from the national budget earmarked for research and development activities. It is not hard to find comments suggesting that this is actually the most important task of every ministry of science. Comments in the other direction relate more to taxpayers' money and how usefully it is spent. How do you assess the current situation? Where is more effort needed on your part?*

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: I have no doubt that citizens will agree with me when I say that money invested in knowledge and science always pays dividends. Apart from that, the situation with the budget is like with one's own wallet: there is always less money than one would wish. It is encouraging that funds have increased in the adjustment of the budget for 2008 and 2009; both nominally and in the proportion allotted to our ministry in terms of the total budget. The awareness of this government is at a high level as far as knowledge, development, research and innovation are concerned. If we look at concrete figures we can see that the budget funds envisaged for 2008 have increased by 10.2% in comparison to a year ago. We have increased funds in the sphere of young researchers from the business enterprise sector by more than 48%; this is the concrete contribution we are referring to when we say that the university and the business enterprise sector are coming together. In 2009 an additional 60% will be earmarked for this purpose. Funds are also increasing in the sphere of the information society and for a number of other budget items. Greater awareness of the need for suitable financing is important, both among politicians and among the public. Additional financing has also been promised from the structural funds, on which our ministry is already successfully drawing.

QUARK: *Do you intend to complete most of the projects planned under your predecessor Dr Jure Zupan?*

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: Of course. Above all, this means the decree on the financing of higher education from 2009 onwards. In December we

opened the Dom Iris “smart home” at the Institute for Rehabilitation. This will be useful both for the disabled and for the elderly, since it presents technological innovations that can make their life easier all in one place. In the first weeks of 2008 we will be carrying out, for the third year, a campaign to familiarise pupils in the last years of secondary school with study programmes in connection with job opportunities. Just before the end of 2007, in conjunction with the TIA, we issued a call for applications from young researchers from the business enterprise sector and held an information day on this topic just after the New Year. We were pleased to see that the event attracted around a hundred participants. In January we signed a letter of intent with regard to the purchase of research equipment at the Chemistry Institute. This is a piece of apparatus worth over EUR 400,000 for which funds will be contributed by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, the University of Nova Gorica, the Chemistry Institute and the Slovenian Research Agency. And of course in the first half of the year we will have our hands full with the Presidency of the EU Council. Our ministry will be one of the most active during this six-month period, if we look at the number of meetings of EU Councils which fall into our areas of competence. We are involved in three of the nine ministerial meetings of the Council: the Competitiveness Council, the Education, Youth and Culture Council, and the Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council.

QUARK: *Some of the initiatives of your predecessor encountered considerable resistance. How have you planned your approach to addressing the problems you have inherited?*

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: I believe that I have been successful in renewing dialogue with higher education partners. This is a basis for continuing to work together in the future. I am convinced that with an attitude of partnership we will be able to achieve a great many common goals.

QUARK: *Among the objectives of the Bologna Process from the Berlin Communiqué is the promotion of the mobility of students and of academic and administrative staff within the EU. But the realisation of this objective brings with it a whole series of*



conditions and requirements. Putting it broadly, the objective is to facilitate greater mobility within the EU than there has been to date within individual Member States, which will not be easy to achieve. There has been much talk about the standardisation of programmes, material, individual subjects and even marking in examinations. What will standardisation actually include? On the other hand, alongside the standardisation process, a process of diversification of individual curricula is supposed to be taking place. A greater breadth of choices will be available, enabling university faculties a certain degree of competition in terms of both quality and choice of subject matter. If we have understood correctly, the first years of degree courses will become increasingly uniform within the standards, while subsequent years will offer increasing variety, with completely different optional subjects. How are we responding to these initiatives and challenges in Slovenia?

Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Mojca Kucler Dolinar

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: Slovenia is following the Bologna guidelines and university faculties are adapting their courses in accordance with these guidelines. Eventual changes in the technical and science spheres are progressing slightly more slowly than in the sphere of social sciences. It is however encouraging that there is considerable interest in the Bologna study programmes among the younger generation. The anxiety over the introduction of the Bologna Process was that it would merely involve formal changes to study programmes that would not take into account the ideas of the Bologna reform in terms of content. For this reason quality and the renovation of study programmes according to the Bologna guidelines must be inseparable. This is the objective that Slovenia's higher education area needs to set itself, as it strives to become competitive at the European level. In the 2007/08 academic year there are a total of 269 study programmes available in Slovenia, of which 101 are Bologna programmes, which represents over 37% of first-cycle study programmes. University faculties still have a great deal of work to do before the 2009/2010 academic year, the deadline for the adaptation of all study programmes to the Bologna criteria. Our ministry is also working to ensure the mobility of students and professors. Slovenia's higher education institutions have been participating in the Erasmus programme since 1999. That year 170 students from Slovenia took part. Last year the number reached almost 900, which signifies a five-fold increase. It is also encouraging that the number of students coming to Slovenia from abroad is constantly growing. The same applies to teacher exchanges. In all the years to date, over 3000 students from Slovenia have taken part in the Erasmus programme. Preparations are already under way in Europe for the second phase, Erasmus Mundus II. In the sphere of higher education we will be discussing this very important dossier – which is good evidence of how the Union can benefit citizens in practice – during Slovenia's Presidency of the EU Council. It involves exchange programmes for students and teachers and university-level cooperation with third countries that are not members of the EU. The new generation of this programme envisages widening it to include doctoral studies, more cooperation among universities, more mobility schemes, and more financial

support (almost three times as much money as in the first generation – EUR 950 million). The cooperation on an equal footing of the countries of the Western Balkans is also envisaged.

QUARK: The EU conceives its openness to the outside world in terms of programme-oriented activities. Slovenia is already involved in one of these broadly conceived initiatives, the Mediterranean University project. In what areas is it particularly active? What aspects are particularly interesting for Slovenia?

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: Above all widening the recognisability of Slovenia

and making it interesting for students, teachers and researchers from Europe and further afield.

QUARK: Academic institutions are investing considerable efforts in promoting links with the business enterprise sector, but there is a suggestion that the additional effort is not resulting in a corresponding increase in the volume of cooperation with the business enterprise sector, although they also have visible results and years of experience of links of this kind. Do you see a possibility for additional incentives on the part of your ministry or the ministry of the economy?

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: Our ministry is constantly working in this direction. I do not entirely agree with you that cooperation between academic institutions and the business enterprise sector is not as good as it should be. On the contrary, I believe that it continues to grow. The project involving young researchers from the business enterprise sector is a good example of this. Links between universities and other academic institutions and the business enterprise sector are likewise a good example. The purchase of expensive research equipment at the Chemistry Institute, which will serve both academic institutions and the business enterprise sector, is further evidence

Successfully concluded negotiations between MHEST and education union

Negotiations have been successfully concluded at the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MHEST) on an annexe to the Collective Agreement on Research Activities. The annexe was initialled by the Minister for Higher Education, Science and Technology, Mojca Kucler Dolinar, and by Janez Stergar on behalf of SVIZ, the education and science workers union.

The annexe served to define and rank in pay brackets positions and job titles in the area of research activity and accompanying jobs.

Thus the average basic salary of a researcher should rise by 12.6 percent, with the rise for leading positions such as scientific associate, senior scientific associate and scientific councillor amounting to around 17 percent.



of this government's awareness of the importance of connecting the triangle of knowledge. Slovenia wishes to be a knowledge-based society. It devotes 1.6% of GDP to science, research and technological development. This percentage represents roughly EUR 500 million of public and private funds invested in research and development. We can boast 388 research organisations. I believe that the successful transfer of knowledge and research to the business enterprise sector, the creation of good working conditions for researchers, and research mobility are all important for the future.

QUARK: *How do you rate inclusion in the 7th European Framework project? Have the capacities of Slovenia's research and development potential been well exploited to date, or do you believe that more will need to be done in the future with a better organised approach? Perhaps you incline more towards the view that better quality work at all levels will in itself promote such associations of individual groups of researchers and enterprises that they will have more opportunities for successful inclusion in European Framework projects?*

Mojca Kucler Dolinar: As a candidate for membership of the EU the Republic of Slovenia took part in the 4th Framework Programme for the period 1994–1998, in the 5th Framework Programme for the period 1998–2002 and in the 6th Framework Programme for the period 2002–2006. Slovenia was enabled to take part in the 4th Framework Programme of the EU as a central European state and EU candidate country without financial obligations under the “project by project” system, which means that Slovenian organisations were able to take part in all projects in which they were accepted by partners from the EU, while the European Commission covered the financial participation of the Slovenian partners on the basis of signed contracts from a special fund for third countries. During the course of the 4th Framework Programme, Slovenian organisations took part in a total of 124 projects. In the 5th Framework Programme Slovenia was an official full participant for the first time, on the basis of a resolution of the EU-Slovenia Association Council, with the obligation to pay a membership fee. It was successful, since it received 2.4 times more funds than it paid. In the 5th Framework Programme a total of 481 Slovenian organisations took part in 385 projects, which means

that Slovenia participated in 2.2% of all projects implemented as part of this programme. Slovenia took part in the 6th Framework Programme as a full member even before joining the EU. The number of contracts with Slovenian participants was around

450 and the total number of Slovenian participants exceeded 550. The 7th Framework Programme is still under way and therefore we do not yet have any figures regarding the participation of Slovenian enterprises.

Handover of the Chairmanship of the EUREKA initiative from Slovenia to the next Chairman country, Portugal



Ministers Mojca Kucler Dolinar and Jose Mariano Gago