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Descartes Prize Ceremony

Brussels, 7 March, 2007

Minister Schavan,

Ministers,

Distinguished guests,

It's a real pleasure to be here tonight in such eminent company.

Just over a week ago, Hollywood hosted the Oscars. Tonight Brussels hosts European Science's Oscars. Or almost.

Because I have noticed some connections between tonight's event and the one in Hollywood.

In Hollywood, the best movie was 'The Departed'. Here tonight, the winners will be 'the future'.

In Hollywood, the best music Oscar went to 'Babel'. It's also a word we often use in our Europe of 21 languages.

And the best Hollywood documentary Oscar went to Al Gore's 'An inconvenient truth', about climate change. A film which developed its arguments on the results of EU-funded research!

I should also mention that one of the Hollywood Oscar winners actually received EU research funding. Furnace Software, which improves movie visual special effects, was developed in Europe with help from Marie Curie funding. It's good to see research not only coming out of the laboratory, but also going up the red carpet.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Other speeches will follow mine tonight, so I would like to make three quick points.

The first is that the 13 Descartes prize nominees can all be proud of what they have done to get here. Their scientific achievements speak for themselves. But the prize also recognises the collaboration that lies behind that achievement. This prize is about teamwork as well as science.

The first Descartes Prizes were awarded in 2000 and since then 66 teams have competed for a prize. The total prize money of more than one million euros is our way of recognizing the work of those eminent scientists. And I think tonight's nominees embody the slogan of today's event: namely 'Today is the Future'.

My second point refers to this evening's second prize, the Descartes Prize for Science Communication.

At this point, I would like you to imagine if I continued my speech in my native Slovenian. Nobody would understand – except very few. This reflects science communication. Without the people, or the language to bridge the gap of what scientists know, and what a wider audience can comprehend, nobody would understand – except very few.

The people who can bridge that divide deserve our recognition. And that is what tonight's communication prize is about.

This is an increasingly important area.

In the EU, we have:

- a shrinking population;
- fewer school children choosing science subjects and;
- a worrying replacement rate for existing scientists.

We can't expect this situation to change without better communication.

The final point I want to make today is about people. For me, science is all about people.

- If we don't have them, we achieve nothing;
- If we don't give them the necessary tools, we restrict their success and;
- If we don't treat them with the respect they deserve, they leave for other countries or jobs.

I hope tonight is a signal to the people of the science community that we do recognise their work and its importance.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I know there is no real Oscar trophy available tonight. And I apologise that Helen Mirren is not coming. But even so, this is your night. I hope you enjoy it.

I would like to finish by referring to Descartes himself. He once said: 'It is not enough to have a good mind. The important thing is to use it well.' It's a lesson from the past for all of our futures.

Thank you.