

University business dialogue: a new partnership for the modernisation of Europe's universities

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PURPOSE: to highlight the activities of the European Forum for University-Business Dialogue, the new partnership for the modernisation of universities.

BACKGROUND: Europe aspires to become the world's leading knowledge economy and society and universities are powerful motors in achieving this ambition. In its 2006 communication, "Delivering on the Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation" ([COM\(2006\)0208](#)), the Commission underlined several areas of action in which there was an urgent need for greater cooperation between university and companies.

It was on this basis that the Commission created the European Forum for University-Business Dialogue as a European platform for dialogue between the two worlds. Indeed, the Forum's success has shown the renewed urgency for closer links between the partners to foster stronger cooperation between them, in particular in this current period of recession.

The aim of this communication is to respond to this need by taking stock of the Forum's activities in 2008-2009 and looking at how issues might be addressed by means of future actions.

CONTENT: the aims of this communication are:

- to take stock of what has been learned from the first year of the Forum, and other relevant activities at European level, about the challenges and barriers to university-business cooperation,
- to make proposals for the next steps in the Forum's work.
- to outline concrete follow-up actions to strengthen university-business cooperation.

1. 1st year of the Forum's activities – main conclusions: there are **6 main themes**:

1. **New curricula for employability:** employability is the Forum's central theme. There was consensus on the need for comprehensive change to curricula and learning methods and for: i) the inclusion of transversal and transferable skills; ii) better examination methods, more geared towards the assessment of learning and competences; iii) greater diversification of admission profiles and approaches to learning in order to tap talent from non-traditional backgrounds; iv) greater interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity of education and research agendas. To succeed in changing employability curricula in this way, the Commission considers that internal quality assurance (QA) and external accreditation systems should pay more attention to the social and economic relevance of learning programmes. And that accreditation agencies should include representatives from learners as well as of business and society at large;
2. **fostering entrepreneurship:** the regular flow of students and members of staff from university to business and of business people to universities would help create the required change in culture. The Commission concludes that i) the development of an entrepreneurial culture at universities requires profound changes in university governance and leadership; ii) entrepreneurship education has to be comprehensive and open to all interested students, in all academic disciplines, with due regard to the gender perspective; iii) universities should

involve entrepreneurs and business people in the teaching of entrepreneurship; and iv) professors and teachers should have access to training in teaching entrepreneurship and exposure to the business world;

3. **knowledge transfer:** to promote knowledge transfer, the Commission considers that it is necessary for universities to: i) cooperate better with businesses in a general framework of cooperation and mutual understanding; ii) ensure interdisciplinarity; monodisciplinary solutions are rarely the answer to real world problems; iii) cooperate with public research organisations to have a clear long-term strategy for the management of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR); iv) reach out to SMEs;
4. **mobility:** student placements, industry-academia mobility programmes and collaborative project work between universities and industry: the overall level of contact, interaction and mobility between the two sectors remains far too low. In order to make progress it is important that: i) the value of mobility needs to be promoted and recognised by university and business in all its forms and at all levels; ii) in particular SMEs should participate more in internships; iii) legal frameworks have to be adapted to support and facilitate mobility between university and business; iv) mobility of academics, researchers or students to business needs to be recognised and accredited.
5. **opening up universities to lifelong learning:** at a time when student numbers may well start to turn down for demographic reasons, continuing education would seem to represent a hugely important potential opportunity for universities. Nevertheless, universities open themselves only to a very low share of the market for continuing education. It is of prime importance that: i) Lifelong Learning (LLL) is fully integrated into the missions and strategies of universities; ii) the updating/upgrading of skills has to be valued and recognised on the labour market and by employers; and iii) LLL has to be developed in partnership with enterprises – universities cannot design and deliver alone.
6. **better university governance:** the Forum focused on governance at national, regional and institutional level as a precondition for effective collaboration between university and business. According to the communication, at national level, changes are sought in legislation, funding arrangements and incentive structures which were seen as either not supportive of or sometimes hostile to university- business cooperation. Such cooperation should be part of the overall strategy of universities and included in development planning and objective setting. The Commission's main conclusions are: i) national and regional framework conditions have to provide a supportive environment for Universities to engage in cooperation with business; ii) University-Business cooperation has to be embedded in institutional strategies; leadership and effective management of human resources are crucial for the implementation; and iii) governance has to ensure that relevant incentive and assessment systems that are in line with the mission, the role and the strategy of universities are put in place.

2. Future actions: the Commission proposes two types of follow-up actions. Firstly, responding to the wish strongly expressed by the Forum participants to continue and deepen the work. Secondly, the Forum has identified a number of issues and potential lines of action which deserve attention as soon as possible. In this context, a series of practical initiatives is proposed:

Continuing the dialogue:

- the Forum will continue with the structure of plenary meetings and thematic seminars; a web site will be developed;
- the partnership needs also the active involvement of national governments and regional authorities.
- drawing on the dialogue to date and on work ongoing in other areas, the following issues should be discussed: i) ensuring that the university world responds effectively to the 'New Skills for New Jobs' agenda and to the challenges posed by the economic downturn; ii) partnerships for regional development; iii) partnerships with SMEs; iv) diversification of approaches to learning and building

bridges between various types of higher education; v) QA and accreditation as tools to support university-business cooperation;

- the Forum should be more explicitly open to actors from beyond the EU.

Developing new partnerships: the Forum has argued for the creation of new forms of structured partnership between business and universities to develop and deliver educational courses. The Commission proposes to explore immediately how such partnerships could be supported via relevant EU programmes, with a view to launching calls for proposals for exploratory actions under the Lifelong Learning programme (LLP) in 2010. The Commission will also explore how existing programmes – for example the Leonardo da Vinci and Comenius programmes – and initiatives as European Schoolnet can be used to bring enterprises and schools together in education partnerships, and how cooperation might be promoted via a European coordination body. The Commission intends to invite stakeholders to explore future possibilities for cooperation between enterprises and schools and VET institutions at a conference. The Commission will encourage national authorities to establish similar national-level dialogue structures (perhaps with the help of the Structural Funds). Lastly, it will launch a study to establish an inventory on existing best practices in the field of cooperation between universities and enterprises.