

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

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted an own-initiative report drawn up by Pál SCHMITT (EPP, HU) on university-business dialogue: a new partnership for the modernisation of Europe's universities, in response to the Commission Communication on the subject.

Members welcome the communication entitled and the areas on which it proposes to focus future cooperation. They believe that continuous dialogue and collaboration at local, regional, national and European level, including exchanges of best practice in relation to programmes and instruments, are vital in establishing closer links and partnerships between the university and business communities. The report endorses the view that dialogue and cooperation between business and higher education institutions should remain one of the priorities for the near future. It emphasises that university-business dialogue should not be targeted only at the mathematics, science and technology (MST) education but should cover all fields of study, e.g. humanities.

The committee calls for awareness and concrete action by Member States where legal and financial framework still fail to reward or even inhibit the efforts of universities to cooperate with the business sector. It calls on national, regional and local authorities to continue, in association with the private sector, to explore and fund processes that enhance the interaction between universities and business, and to remove the administrative obstacles that impede them.

Members suggest that a special focus should be placed at securing SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) access to university education and research both by increasing public funding and by simplifying bureaucracy. They underline the need to dignify and give an incentive to investigation and research, not only in scientific and technologic areas but also in social and human areas where valuable knowledge for state-of-the-art business is provided.

Lifelong learning: Members emphasise that a stronger learning culture must be established, promoted and reinforced, and that continuing training and retraining at all stages of life are critical to increase Europe's competitiveness and foster growth and jobs in Europe, and to create conditions suitable for promoting a positive attitude to learning from childhood. Bearing in mind the demographic transformation of Europe (into an ageing society) and also the changing conditions of the labour market due to the economic, social and employment crisis, Members call on universities to widen access to learning and to modernise curricula addressing the new challenges in order to upgrade the skills of the European workforce. They also urge universities to widen access to learning and international exchange programmes also for people with disabilities.

The report underlines the need to provide more scope for stimulating continuous adaptation to the changing labour market – which is a priority for the EU especially in the current recession – by fostering lifelong learning, particularly through the development of distance learning courses specially adapted to the new technologies and courses for the over-45s, who are more vulnerable and at greater risk of social exclusion.

Mobility, partnerships and curricula: the committee reiterates that mobility is a cornerstone of the European higher education area in which European universities are invited to undertake innovative, far-reaching and methodical curricular reform. This should be a political priority in the context of redefining the major goals of the Bologna Process beyond 2010. The Commission is invited to propose a legal

framework designed to support and facilitate mobility between universities and business, and among students and university lecturers, and to emphasise the need to recognise and certify this form of learning and teaching. Members encourage not only the extension and expansion of individual mobility schemes, but also the organisation of postgraduate European Masters of Excellence programmes, in cooperation with different universities and with the active participation of businesses. coupled with grants for students and incentives for researchers.

The report stresses the need for higher education institutions to provide more extra-curricular opportunities to learn other languages. It encourages universities to explore new methods of cooperation between public institutions and the private sector, especially through joint public and private innovation funds in order to improve mobility in all areas. It stresses the need for proper preparation and training of teachers of subjects in the field of entrepreneurship and encourages the business world business world to help adapt the university curriculum, by initiating and financing specific courses, with the aim of familiarising students with the challenges of entrepreneurship.

Members stress the importance of widespread provision of work placements in companies as part of the curriculum, especially for students in higher education, and of remunerating such placements financially or through the European Credit Transfer System. The Commission is asked to launch a European Industrial PhD scheme comparable to existing Industrial PhD schemes in Europe as part of the Marie Curie activities within the Framework Programme in order to promote targeted and affordable research for European companies as well as inputs from the business sector into European universities.

Research: the report underlines emphasises the need for enterprises to increase their absorption capacity to use and transform the scientific knowledge generated by universities by fostering internal research, lifelong learning and continuing education and engaging in an active policy of communicating their needs to the academic community and recruiting doctoral and post-doctoral graduates and researchers. It sees greater researcher mobility as imperative in enhancing knowledge transfer and calls on the Member States and the Commission to review the existing legal and financial framework and to eliminate unnecessary barriers to mobility, paying special attention to the recognition of academic qualifications and the reduction of bureaucracy.

Members invite the Commission to create incentives for the development of a competitive EU market for intellectual property rights (IPR). They emphasise the need to speed up efforts to promote a Single European Patent and a harmonised European patent litigation system. They point out that the joint participation of universities and business in public-private partnerships, such as European Technology Platforms, Joint Technology Initiatives and Knowledge and Innovation Communities, could enhance the exploitation of knowledge and help the EU to address the major challenges it faces.

Good practices: the report proposes that a website be set up for the purpose of sharing and disseminating experience and for communication focusing on sharing good practice and providing visitors with inspiration and concrete tools and mechanisms for designing and implementing cooperation projects. It points out the importance of using new technologies to foster closer cooperation between the university and business communities. Members hope, on the basis of existing good practice in various Member States, for the promotion of a European day devoted to young inventors, i.e. to innovations, inventions or patents conceived by young Europeans.