Modernising Europe's higher education systems

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted the own-initiative report by László TKÉS (EPP, RO) on modernising Europe's higher education systems.

The report recalls that the Europe 2020 Strategy states that, by 2020, 40 % of 30-34-year-olds in Europe should complete higher education or equivalent studies. However, that in 2010 only 26 % of the workforce in the EU had attained this qualification level.

Members stressed that in the EU in 2010, **unemployment of tertiary education graduates stood at 5.4 %** compared with more than 15 % among those with only lower secondary education showing that it is taking longer and longer for the majority of those graduates to find secure employment. It is also noted that 75 of the top 200 universities worldwide are to be found in the EU Member States but only 200 of Europe's 4 000 higher education institutions rank among the top 500 in the world. This situation should be improved. In this regard, the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a significant development that could contribute to European integration while respecting the diversity of education in the various EU Member States and the goals of higher education in relation to society.

The changing role of higher education institutions: Members call on higher education institutions to integrate lifelong learning into their curricula, with the help of economic assistance and different study programmes, and to adapt to a student base that includes adults, elderly people, non-traditional learners, full-time students who have to work while studying and people with disabilities. They therefore call on higher education institutions to implement programmes aimed at **removing existing obstacles and barriers**.

Higher education institutions should take into account the needs of professionals who need, as lifelong learners, to update and broaden their skills at regular intervals, including through the organisation and fine-tuning of update courses. They are called upon to uphold the spirit of autonomy in teaching and research.

The report calls on Member States, regional and local governments and higher education institutions to strengthen – inter alia through the development of adequate financial support schemes – their efforts to **widen equitable access to studies for all**, from early childhood to higher education, irrespective of sex, ethnicity, language, religion, disability or social background, and to fight all forms of discrimination, recognising multiculturalism and multilingualism, including sign languages, as fundamental values of the EU that need to be fostered. Student participation in sports should also be encouraged.

Moreover, the education institutions should:

- emphasise the importance of promoting democratic values, while stressing the need to acquire a sound knowledge of European integration and ensuring that Europe's former totalitarian regimes are understood as part of its common history;
- not permit the education system to be totally subordinated to the labour market, in view of the need to shape ethical and moral values among students;
- establish a general framework – covering rules, responsibilities, political and educational objectives and the quality of, and priority given to, training and research – in which to promote best practices and respond to the challenges of the communication society;
- emphasise that academic staff and students, as well as their organisations and associations, need to be involved in the modernisation of higher education institutions.

Information about higher education institutions: Members propose the introduction of clear and uniform criteria for the creation of pan-European rankings of higher education institutions, thereby allowing prospective students to make an informed choice of university and providing comprehensive information about the respective universities. They support the Commission's initiative to launch, in cooperation with all the institutions, students and other stakeholders involved, a multi-dimensional tool for the differentiated classification and ranking of higher education institutions based on characteristics such as a long tradition of providing higher education in Europe, the quality of teaching, student support (i.e. scholarships, counselling, housing), physical and info-communication accessibility, regional engagement and knowledge transfer. On the other hand, they oppose the establishment of a classification of higher education institutions on the basis of non-homogeneous performance indicators which do not take into account the diversity of educational pathways, programmes and linguistic diversity in European universities.

Funding higher education systems: the report stresses that **higher education is a public good** that fosters culture, diversity, democratic values and personal development and prepares students to become active citizens who will support European cohesion. It insists once again that Member States should reach the target of investing **2 % of GDP in education**. Members consider that mainly public and also private funding is of primary importance for the modernisation of higher education systems and emphasise that investment in higher education in Europe is crucial to overcoming the current economic crisis.

The Member States and higher education institutions are called upon to expand scholarship and funding programmes for those institutions and to develop innovative methods of funding mechanisms which can contribute to more efficient functioning of higher education institutions, complement public funding without increasing the pressure on households and make higher education accessible to all. Members express regret at the **significant cutbacks to education budgets** in several Member States, as well as the constant increase in education fees, which is leading to a significant increase in the number of vulnerable students.

As EU level, Members call for the EU budget for 2014-2020 under the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund to include spending on higher education related to investments in university infrastructure and academic staff.

The transition from higher education to the labour market: Members call on higher education institutions to adapt to new challenges by creating new fields of study that reflect the needs of the labour market, taking into account the development of science and technology by maintaining an appropriate balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. They urge the Commission to present its **proposal for a quality framework for traineeships**.

The report calls on higher education institutions and institutions responsible for the education sector at regional, national and European level to monitor trends in labour market requirements in order to reflect more accurately future needs in terms of learning opportunities. There is a need to track graduates' employment outcomes to measure how well higher education responds to labour market demands. Members welcome the Commission's commitment to improving the availability of such data, with the principal aim of providing students with the necessary information to guide their study choices, while at the same time giving higher education and research institutions the necessary information to identify and, subsequently, develop programmes of study covering both **general knowledge and specific professional skills through lifelong learning**.

Other measures are called for, such as:

- to collect and publish statistical data regarding the correlation between different higher education degrees and employment opportunities;

- to develop an international databank, similar to AlmaLaurea, which helps graduates to identify suitable job, training, study and research opportunities;
- to increase the provision of support and guidance for students entering the labour market.

Gender balance in higher education: faced with existing gender disparities in European education systems, Members call for measures to combat persistent stereotypes in training. Recalling that women are more often overqualified and underpaid for their jobs and often end up unemployed or in casual jobs, the report calls for measures to combat this situation.

It also suggests:

- developing initiatives to provide information about gender equality and promote gender equality in education;
- that teachers should receive specific training on equality between men and women;
- that women learners may have specific additional responsibilities outside of learning which should be recognised such as caring for young children or elderly relatives;
- the need for educational institutions to supply parents – especially women – with a sufficient quantity of high-quality, affordable and accessible childcare, including community centres, so as to facilitate their equal participation in studies and research;
- the introduction of a greater variety of study modes, such as part-time and distance learning.

Engaged higher education institutions: Members encourage higher education institutions to **engage more intensively with their regions** and establish dynamic collaborative actions with regional governments, local councils, public bodies, non-governmental organisations and small and medium-sized enterprises to enhance regional development; points out that this should also strengthen interaction between higher education institutions and employers.

They call specifically on the Member States and their central and regional authorities, the Commission and the business world to:

- include and support higher education institutions in cross-border cooperation;
- intensify the interaction between the sides of the knowledge triangle (education, research, innovation) as a key element for growth and job creation;
- develop partnerships with higher education institutions by providing high-quality internships for students and lecturers and capitalising on lecturers' general transferable skills.

Members call for a commitment to **more flexible and innovative learning approaches** and to delivery methods which are always centred on students' needs.

The report notes the need for cross-border higher education institutions and enterprises to cooperate in practical programmes and in shaping students' future careers by identifying the specific development pathways, expectations and challenges that will await them in the labour market. It also emphasises the usefulness of developing mechanisms and management strategies that facilitate the transfer of innovative ideas and research results into society and business.

Members reaffirm the value of democratic **governance** as a fundamental way to ensure academic freedom and promote active participation by all actors in the life of a higher education institution. It also emphasises that the principle of democracy and self-governance among higher education institutions and their staff and students should be respected and maintained in all collaborative projects. It emphasises the importance of cooperation between higher education institutions and NGOs and the European voluntary sector, in order to promote active citizenship and involve students in active participation through working for the NGO sector.

Member States are called upon to support and encourage:

- the importance of sport in the education process;
- the importance of culture in higher education and calls for the inclusion of special criteria for the humanities in both innovation and research;
- student initiatives, as well as assisting in the coordination of such activities among other higher education institutions, enterprises and local authorities from various Member States.

Mutual recognition of qualifications: the report calls on the Member States and these institutions to develop clear, integrated pathways that allow learners to progress from other types of education into higher education and to change between different tracks and types of institutions. It emphasises, however, the need to **maintain the diversity of educational pathways and programmes**, teaching methods and university systems in the EU. Members take the view that it is consequently necessary to develop a national qualification framework, while at the same time promoting the mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications across all Member States.

All EU countries are urged to implement the **national qualification frameworks** linked to the EHEA Qualifications Framework and to develop, and provide financial support for, mutual recognition. In this context, Members stress the need to strengthen student mobility through Erasmus and for the the home university to recognise qualifications acquired while studying at other universities.

Members support the Commission's proposal to improve recognition of study undertaken abroad.

Enhancing mobility in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and beyond: Members stress that greater coordination among Member States in the field of higher education – including through strong financial and political support for agreements on common core curricula and well-defined learning outcomes – is a prerequisite for achieving the goals of employability and growth in Europe. They point out the need for collaboration between the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA) as a means to support university research programmes in both science and the humanities.

The report calls for the **mobility** at staff and student level be strengthened, in particular with the countries which are covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) or which directly border the EU. It calls on the Commission to propose the creation of **Euro-Mediterranean Erasmus and Leonardi da Vinci programmes**, aimed at promoting transnational mobility among students from both sides of the Mediterranean. Members call for the opening of mobility, exchange, research and work experience programmes to students from countries affiliated to the Eastern Partnership. They emphasise the need for the higher education system in each Member State to provide higher-quality teaching so that increased mobility opportunities for students do not go hand in hand with a worsening of the '**brain drain'**, which is now a genuine social problem in some Member States.

Lastly, Members call for:

- the abolition of differences between western and central-eastern European higher education systems, with a view to encouraging and supporting cross-border collaboration between higher education institutions;
- the evaluation of the possibility of promoting, within the study cycle, a compulsory training period at a university in a Member State other than the one to which the student is affiliated;
- the strengthening of the principle that loan schemes cannot substitute the grant systems put in place to support access to education for all students regardless of their social background;
- further clarification of the proposal to create a financial instrument to help students secure funding for a Masters degree outside their home Member State.