Research: towards a European area

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The committee adopted the report by Mrs Elly PLOOIJ-VAN GORSEL (ELDR, NL) on the Commission communication "Towards a European research area". The committee felt that European research would be at its most efficient if there was a joint European research area in which joint action was taken to define joint objectives and to make the best possible use of resources to achieve these objectives. However, such joint European research efforts should not stand in the way of the pursuit of competing research programmes by the Member States. The committee emphasised that European assistance for R&D should not only help the EU to achieve a stronger competitive position, but should contribute to the growth in knowledge and learning to improve employment and prosperity and support EU policies. It also concluded that a European Research Area required a major contribution from the EU institutions, in particular the Commission, to ensure greater coherence among different programmes at regional and member state level. The institutions should focus on objectives that could only be achieved at EU level and ancillary activities, such as monitoring progress, communicating information, fostering best practice, developing Framework Programmes in areas requiring EU-level support, improving the legal framework, etc. The committee called on the Member States to set a target of at least 3% of their GDP for research, but urged them to regard national research programmes not only as programmes intended primarily to strengthen their own economies but also as programmes for promoting economic growth, competitiveness, employment and cohesion throughout the EU. The private sector currently accounted for two thirds of R&D activity in the EU, and the committee called on the Commission to work more closely with industry to help establish a genuine European research area and to specify what role the European business community might play in such efforts. It should also, together with the Member States, develop closer links between research, universities and industry and commerce. Lastly, the committee suggested that a permanent research field be established dealing with the ethics of science and technology, with the specific aim of undertaking a comparative study of the laws and ethical criteria governing the research programmes of the EU Member States and the industrialised countries in general, with a view to encouraging the development of a coherent and common approach to these issues.