24 May 2007

Meeting between the Troika of the Education Council and social partners, Brussels, 24 May 2007

Speech by Heikki Suomalainen, Chairman of BUSINESSEUROPE Education & Training Working Group

1) INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting BUSINESSEUROPE to this meeting prior to the Education Council meeting that will take place tomorrow.

The agenda for the Council foresees several important items for discussion. Without trying to be comprehensive, I will focus the BUSINESSEUROPE message on a few key points for employers.

2) EQF

- The EQF, due to be formally adopted by the Council this year, has already been the catalyst for much activity within Member States.
- If we look at the most up-to-date information available, it is having a positive impact in stimulating developments regarding National Qualification Frameworks.
- This is vital because the national frameworks will ultimately make the EQF more relevant and useful, not only for individuals but also for companies.
- Only 3 Member States have so far indicated that preparations towards developing an overarching national framework are not a policy priority.
- This clearly underlines its importance.

- In brief, BUSINESSEUROPE supports the EQF's approach and focus on Learning Outcomes, and we hope this will enable closer alignment of qualifications to labour market needs and the realities in workplaces.

- I would also like to briefly touch upon the proposed ECVET system.
- The Commission's consultation results are not yet available, but we have noted that the forthcoming Commission Recommendation is to be finalised in 2007.
- We are confident that the outcomes of the consultation will be efficiently taken into account.
- We would therefore like to underscore the importance of a step-by-step approach in its implementation; as well as the need for a comprehensive testing phase to allow time to fine-tune the modalities of a future fully-fledged ECVET system.
- So the forthcoming recommendation should not aim to be too prescriptive or detailed as regards to implementation.

- The first step in the implementation of these European tools is to develop mechanisms so that national qualifications are compatible with the EQF.
- This must remain the central focus in Member States in the near future.

- The implementation of ECVET is a secondary step in the process.
- Even though it should be closely aligned to the EQF, Member States need time to further discuss and test ECVET.

3) INDICATORS AND BENCHMARKS & EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY-MAKING

On the proposed draft Conclusions, I would like to highlight a couple of points.

- Developing a coherent framework of indicators can result in a worthwhile contribution to policy-making, notably as it is in line with in enhancing the efficiency and equity of education systems.
- If we are able to map more accurately the types of actions, activities and partnerships which yield the best results, it can have a positive impact not only within Member States but also in terms of sharing best practices across countries.
- A coherent framework using a common language and understanding is therefore key to fulfilling this objective.

- Now is the right time to think about how we can take the 'Education and Training 2010' process forward.
- Whilst it is important that we continue to focus on developing the existing European tools already mentioned, we also need initiatives to ensure better policy-making and European cooperation in conjunction with activities to reinforce Quality Assurance and mutual trust across education systems.

- Referring now to the draft Conclusions.
- All 16 core indicators highlighted are important in their own right.
- Concerning the Commission's task to evaluate the focus of future activities (page 10), we hope that it is envisaged that social partners are involved in the process.

4) EIT

We have also been invited to express views on the EIT, which I will address after some introductory points on higher education.

- Better harnessing the potential of European universities and research is a key factor in addressing the projected increase in demand of highly skilled employees on European labour markets.
- Increasing the numbers of graduates in science and technology disciplines with the right kind of skills, knowledge and competences must especially be considered a policy priority in order to preserve and increase competitiveness.
- BUSINESSEUROPE has thus recently developed a position on the employability of graduates, which was presented at the Bologna Ministerial Meeting held in London on 17 and 18 May, which I would like to draw your attention to.

- Modernising universities is a matter for national competence, but the European level has and can act as a catalyst for action in Member States.
- We can only hope that the same positive stimulation will result from the creation of the EIT.
- The proposed institute can be a means of bridging the innovation gap between Europe and its competitors by strengthening knowledge transfer and by fostering partnerships between academia, research institutes and business specifically aiming at creating innovations.
- However, its success rests with the ability to provide conditions that attract active participation by business.

- The European business community is ready to participate in making the EIT the success it can be, and to contribute to the moulding of the EIT in a way that would turn the positive expectations of business into practical participation.
- In particular, the Governing Board and the Executive Committee should be free from any form of political interference or direction, with a full mandate to make independent decisions on strategic priorities and selection of the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs).

- A significant amount of public funding will be required to start off the KICs which will in turn attract private funding and participation.
- Funding should not be drawn from existing EU research and development or lifelong learning programmes.

I hope, despite some of the cautious comments, that you will receive this as an expression of support for the project even if clarifications are still needed.

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