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PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSTITUTIONS AND EMPLOYERS IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

PRAGUE CONGRESS CENTRE, APRIL 6-7, 2009

**OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE AND INTRODUCTION
MONDAY APRIL 6, 12:30 - 14:30**

INTERVENTION OF PHILIPPE DE BUCK, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Introduction

- To reinforce and leverage our competitive advantages, we need to increase productivity in technology-intensive production and sectors. Therefore, it is essential for our economic prosperity to enhance human capital by upgrading skills. Global competition and an ageing population have accelerated the pace of change in labour market and skills requirements in the EU. Lifelong learning should therefore be a key priority for policy-makers and all the actors concerned. Lifelong learning also can be instrumental to re-integrate people into the labour market.
- Even in times of economic crisis, if you ask businesses, you will hear that they consider the availability of competences as one of their biggest challenges. In many countries and sectors, companies cannot find much-needed highly skilled workers, such as engineers and IT specialists.
- Education institutions are in a key position to respond to those challenges by contributing to the lifelong learning of individuals, to the improvement of skill levels. Together with employers, they can help individuals to continuously adapt and expand knowledge. Well-designed lifelong learning strategies have the potential to offset the economic cost of skills shortages.



Lifelong learning - Upgrading Skills

- European business welcomes the momentum at European level to modernise education & training systems to ensure that they can more closely address the needs of labour markets.
- In this regard, their joint framework of actions on lifelong learning of 2002, European social partners agreed on a joint set of priorities to this effect. Joint detailed annual reports on social partners' initiatives and activities were produced until 2006. They focus on multiple levels, mainly national, regional, sectoral, local and enterprise dimensions.
- There is still much room for improvement in Member States. There are discrepancies across the European Union in terms of the quality and delivery of education & training. Participation rates of adults in lifelong learning are rising too slowly and only in certain Member States. Survey results for 2007 show that under 10 percent of 25-64-year-olds participated in some form of lifelong learning activity in the EU. Significant discrepancies can also be seen in the differences in proportions of GDP spent, school dropout rates and total years spent in education.
- This means that special attention has to be paid to improving guidance throughout life and to building open educational systems. It is important to create access to flexible, individualised pathways and ease the transition to working life and to further education and training. This concerns universities, vocational education & training and schools.
- Ensuring skills development by lifelong learning is part and parcel of flexicurity. The idea is to create "employment security" instead of "security". This means that people can stay in or can easily find employment though they might need to move from one job to another
- As more people will increasingly face transitions, it is necessary that educational institutions reinforce the importance of transversal competences and soft skills. In particular, communication, languages, teamwork and decision making will increase the adaptability of employees. The implementation of entrepreneurship education and teaching "learning to learn" is especially important.



- Increasing the percentage of graduates with competences in maths, science and technology disciplines should be of particular concern for policy-makers and all actors concerned. Companies for their part can help to better communicate what a job in these professional areas involves on a daily basis. They may also provide students with role models and show that a degree in maths, science or technology can potentially open up many more opportunities for careers than other educational pathways.

Vocational education and training

- Vocational education forms a major part of lifelong learning is a crucial factor in providing European citizens with the skills, knowledge and competences needed in the labour market and in knowledge-based society.
- The Copenhagen Process on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training has played a significant role for the development of skill levels in the EU. Still, there is more that can be done as highlighted by the Bordeaux Communiqué of November 2008, to which BUSINESSEUROPE contributed.
- European vocational education and training systems are facing common challenges. It is important that we together look for solutions and learn from each other's experiences. In this respect, the European qualifications framework is an important tool for developing a European area of vocational education & training and supporting lifelong learning. It is based on learning outcomes and on acquired skills and competences. European employers consider that it is a good approach which will improve the transparency of European education and training systems.
- Employers should be continuously involved in the implementation of the Copenhagen process. To contribute to greater employability and employment security, vocational education and training policies must be geared to labour market needs.

Higher Education

- Lifelong Learning should be the 4th mission of universities next to teaching, research and societal needs. I have participated on 28 March 2009 in a conference in Leuven in Belgium on University Lifelong Learning. One of the



main recommendations of this event was that universities should recognise and integrate lifelong learning into their strategies. There was consensus that higher education institutions will have to adapt their offers to different kinds of students. These are young people, mature students and employees undertaking studies while working.

- Access to lifelong learning in higher education institutions needs to be enhanced. They should open up particular to those who hold a vocational qualification. Student numbers may well start to decrease for demographic reasons in the next future. Continuing education can offer potential opportunities for universities to face this development.
- At the University – Business Forum in February in Brussels, a clear message emerged that universities cannot deliver lifelong learning alone. It has to be developed in partnership with business, which have an in-depth insight into the evolving skill needs of enterprises. This was also one of the principal conclusions of the Commission’s communication “University-Business Cooperation” that was presented by Commissioner Figel in a press conference on 2 April 2009, to which I was invited to.
- In Austria, for example, the University Act has established University Councils. Experienced business figures have a role in offering expertise and know-how on company needs. They also give advice in the areas of management, human resources and on fulfilling strategic goals.
- BUSINESSEUROPE supports the idea to create a European coordination body as suggested by the European Roundtable of Industrialists in November 2008. Its aim is to promote new and already existing business-education initiatives for math, science and technology and to drive best practices.
- We are also convinced that the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) can play an important role to further bridge the gap between universities and companies and to bridge the innovation gap between the EU and its major international competitors. We need to achieve excellence in teaching and research by fostering highly integrated public-private networks, composed of businesses, entrepreneurs, universities, research institutes and technology centres.



Schools

- Everything starts already in schools. There, a lifelong learning mentality needs to be instilled into both education practices and attitudes of individuals. Pupils should leave school with the necessary competences and motivated to take responsibility for their own learning throughout life.
- Employer can offer insights into working life and training opportunities for both pupils and teachers. Once they get a feeling for the world of work and the fast pace of change in their areas of interest, this can also enhance their understanding of the importance of lifelong learning.
- Schools need greater flexibility and efficiency in the way they operate. This can be achieved by providing them with the autonomy they need. They should be more accountable to a school board composed of parents, teachers, pupils, professionals and local authorities.

Conclusion

- Lifelong Learning policies must not be understood as being most relevant for adults, but must instead permeate all areas of education and training, starting from pre-school. Lifelong learning must become a norm. Every person must be enabled to develop their own employability.
- Education is and should remain the competence of Member States. However, it is important to identify common European challenges and possible solutions. Education institutions and employers' organisations can significantly contribute to the latter by intensifying their dialogue, in particular about the relevant labour market related competences and qualifications.
