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“A NEW PARTNERSHIP FOR THE MODERNISATION OF UNIVERSITIES: THE EU FORUM FOR UNIVERSITY BUSINESS DIALOGUE”

PRESENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION’S COMMUNICATION BRUSSELS, 1 APRIL, 2009

SPEAKING NOTES FOR PHILIPPE DE BUCK, DIRECTOR GENERAL

General comments

- The organisation of the University-Business Forum was a good initiative by the European Commission creating a European platform to foster the dialogue between the two worlds.
- Two Fora have taken place so far: The first one on 29 February 2008 and the second one on 5 February 2009. BUSINESSEUROPE participated actively in both Fora putting forward the views and recommendations of European business.
- BUSINESSEUROPE welcomes the Commission’s communication. University-Business Cooperation plays a key role to fully understand the new challenges for higher education and to find the right solutions. Now is the right time for a new push for this partnership.
- Especially in times of economic downturn, it is a matter of urgency to step up the efforts to modernise higher education in close cooperation with business. The next economic upswing will be impossible if companies lack a sufficiently qualified work force. Even now, you will hear that businesses 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.
- Latest figures from Germany suggest that in spite of the economic crisis, there is currently a shortfall of around 50 000 engineers. This acts as a serious break on economic growth and hampers competitiveness. In the case of Germany, there is an estimated loss of 23 billion euro for the economy every year.
- BUSINESSEUROPE fully agrees with the selection of the issues and welcomes the principal conclusions of the University-Business Forum as set out in the Commission’s communication.



- We need excellence in European higher education in order to become competitive in a global setting. Therefore, it is important to start and pursue the necessary reforms in higher education.
- Research and innovation have key roles to play in meeting many challenges which European societies face. Enhancing the EU's R&D capacity depends greatly on how closely universities work with the business community, for instance by increasing knowledge transfer and temporary staff exchanges.
- BUSINESSEUROPE welcomes that the Communications call for more direct exposure of university staff to the reality of business and the removal of barriers in this regard. This will also help to understand and anticipate the changing training and innovation needs of industry.
- Lifelong Learning needs to become one of the missions of universities, next to teaching, research and other societal needs. BUSINESSEUROPE has participated last week in a conference in Leuven 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: young people, mature students and employees undertaking studies while working.
- There is still much room for improvement in 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.

Specific comments

- One aspect that cannot be highlighted enough is that universities and all actors concerned should focus in particular on increasing the percentage of graduates with competences in maths, science and technology disciplines.
 - University-Business Cooperation can help to better communicate what a job in these professional areas involves on a daily basis. Companies are well placed to 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.
 - In this regard, it is important address the need to increase the proportion of women taking up and qualifying in traditionally "male-dominated" disciplines. The latest figures show that the number of female graduates in maths, science or technology disciplines rise slowly (only 0, 84 % of the 20-20 year old female population of the EU graduated in MST in 2006, compared to 1, 78 % of male graduates).
 - We support the idea to create a European coordination body to promote new and already existing business-education initiatives for



math, science and technology, and to drive best practices, as suggested by the European Roundtable of Industrialists in November 2008.

- The knowledge triangle (research, education, innovation) needs to integrate commercial awareness and provide individuals with an entrepreneurial mindset. Therefore we welcome in particular that fostering entrepreneurship plays a prominent role in the communication. We fully agree that an entrepreneurial culture should be developed at universities and entrepreneurs and business people need to be involved into the teaching of entrepreneurship.

Future steps

- BUSINESSEUROPE welcomes proposed lines of action in the Communication on continuing the dialogue and developing new partnerships between higher education institutions and business.
- We welcome that the Commission intends to continue with the structure of plenary meetings and thematic seminars and to more strongly involve relevant public representatives.
- We are especially interested to learn more about initiatives to develop partnerships that would echo the structures developed within the Technology Platforms and the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) within the EIT.
