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MEETING BETWEEN THE TROIKA OF THE EDUCATION COUNCIL AND SOCIAL PARTNERS, BRUSSELS

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Dear Ministers, Commissioner, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The recession is now drawing to a close in Europe, but recovery is still fragile and difficult challenges lie ahead. However, we are convinced that Europe's social and economic model offers a strong base for turning current challenges into opportunities for development.

To this end, we need a clear growth strategy for Europe with a strong pillar regarding innovation, entrepreneurship, education and skills.

In order to contribute to this debate, BUSINESSSEUROPE has recently published a brochure explaining how innovation can help to build a successful future for Europe. We strongly emphasise the need for an integrated policy approach to innovation, including education and training.

An integrated approach, where excellent higher education, research and innovation play to each others' strengths, is also essential for a well-functioning knowledge triangle. We therefore would like to thank the Swedish government for making the knowledge triangle one of the priorities of its EU Presidency.

Clearly, the modernisation of higher education institutions is important to make the knowledge triangle work. I will touch on the Bologna process and the issue of quality assessment; subjects that you will be discussing tomorrow. But I will also say a few words about entrepreneurship education and innovation culture, issues which are close to the heart of employers and essential for Europe's future success.



Modernising higher education institutions

One of the key ingredients to make the knowledge triangle work is top quality in higher education and research.

What needs to be done to achieve this goal? When we met last time during the Czech Presidency, we already spoke about the need for universities to establish closer links to the business sector. We also emphasised that a greater degree of autonomy in universities' governance structures is of particular importance.

The Bologna process and the issue of quality assurance are equally important in this debate.

First, Bologna.

The Bologna Process has successfully introduced a three-cycle structure. This has increased compatibility and comparability of national systems. It has made it easier for learners to be mobile and for institutions to attract students and scholars from other countries or continents.

However, growth rates for the ERASMUS programme have decreased from 8% to less than 2%. There is a stagnation/decrease in 11 countries. We have also recently seen students protest in several European countries about their problems with overloaded curricula.

All this should not lead to the Bologna process losing support and credibility. On the contrary. Progress must be made in improving the national Bologna reforms, in particular where implementation problems exist. For example, curricula must be adjusted to allow students to make use of the mobility options.

Secondly, quality assurance.

Europe's quality assurance infrastructure has developed significantly in recent years. However, there is room for improvement. I would like to make three points in this respect.



1. Due to a multiplicity of different national actors, it is difficult for business to understand the different quality assurance systems in the different member states. It is therefore crucial to strengthen the European dimension, also allowing cross-border competition between national quality assurance agencies.
2. Higher education institutions should embrace quality management. Business is ready to support them in this and must be involved in the accreditation or audit processes.
3. University rankings can help to complement quality assurance.

The European university landscape is very wide and very diverse. Ranking instruments can create more transparency while respecting this diversity. They can help students to make informed choices. They can also help education institutions to obtain a better picture of their performance and thus stimulate competition for excellence.

Rankings such as the “Shanghai ranking” or that of the Times Higher Education Supplement are well-known. But they can be improved. For example, the quality of teaching does not receive the consideration it deserves.

It must be ensured that the evaluation of universities reflects the interests of employers and is not based on one-sided indicators, such as research. We need an approach to university performance which looks at all three sides of the knowledge triangle: research, education and innovation.

BUSINESSEUROPE welcomes the recent initiative at EU level to develop transparency instruments. As a member of the Commission’s Advisory Group on a Multidimensional Global University Ranking, we actively contribute to this work. We also participate in the working group on transparency tools of the Bologna Follow-Up Group.

Entrepreneurship education and innovation culture



The reason why I want to discuss this is simple: entrepreneurship is the glue of the knowledge triangle. However, BUSINESSEUROPE is concerned about the comparatively low levels of entrepreneurship in the EU. They call into question Europe's ability to foster growth and jobs. For instance, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2007 shows that entrepreneurship rates in China are 2 to 5 times higher than in EU countries. Higher education must stimulate independence, creativity and an entrepreneurial approach to harnessing knowledge.

Entrepreneurship education requires firstly a change in teaching methods and not simply a change in the content of education. The main focus needs to shift during the educational path. This means working on the attitudes of pupils in kindergarten and in primary school (e.g. creativity, team work, initiative). After that it is necessary to provide practical experience of entrepreneurship in secondary and in tertiary education. Practice-based programmes, such as practice firms and student mini-companies, can be effective tools to teach entrepreneurship.

In addition to that, a regular flow of students and faculty members from university to business and a constant presence of entrepreneurs on campus will help create the required change in culture.

Conclusion

Greater coherence in policies such as the further integration of education, research and innovation policies in a fully functioning knowledge triangle will be key. It must be an integral part of the post-2010 Lisbon agenda. If not, we will never achieve the objective of turning the EU into a truly knowledge-driven economy.

I have tried to make some concrete suggestions to that end. But also for the future, BUSINESSEUROPE is committed to help identify the obstacles and the room for further development to support this process.

Thank you for your attention.
