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ROUND TABLE: THE BENEFITS OF BUSINESS/UNIVERSITY COOPERATION

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Introduction

- We are meeting in difficult circumstances. The financial and economic crisis is hitting Europe hard. Many of the actions to secure Europe's competitive position in the global economy are linked to education and training in general, to the performance of Europe's higher education institutions and structures in particular and their relations with the business world.
- Joint efforts in developing global partnerships between business and universities play a key role in this respect. They are crucial to fully understand the new challenges for higher education and to find the right solutions. They are also crucial to foster entrepreneurship, innovation and research and development.

1. Importance of competences

- Even in these times, 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. This acts as a serious break on economic growth and hampers competitiveness.
- Improving Europe's higher education performance will be a major step towards increasing its competitiveness. Let me give you a few concrete examples that are instrumental in this respect:
 - Policy-makers and all actors concerned should continue to focus in particular on increasing the percentage of graduates with competences in maths, science and technology disciplines.



- To contribute to this, 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.
- In addition to specialist knowledge, courses need to be adapted to provide students also with essential transversal competences such as communication, entrepreneurship, teamwork and decision making, to name a few.
- Managers and entrepreneurs need to be involved in the decision-making bodies of higher education institutions. Business involvement would ensure that students' competences are in line with real business needs.
- A better guidance system developed in cooperation with business could help students make more suitable choices.

2. Focus on innovation, technology and entrepreneurship

- The importance of innovation and technology for future economic growth is obvious. Therefore it is vital to increase public and private investment, especially in R&D.
- 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.
- But it is also clear that the competitiveness of economies is increasingly dependent on the availability of qualified and entrepreneurial workforce. The EU's need for highly-qualified and entrepreneurial graduates will continue to grow in the coming years.
- Either integrated into the curricula or outside of the regular curriculum, higher education institutions need to offer more opportunities to build knowledge transfer and promote entrepreneurship, e.g. by counselling junior entrepreneurs or with incubators providing support to students.



- Let me illustrate that with an successful example from the last University-Business Forum:

The Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich has established an entrepreneurship centre to empower entrepreneurs.

It has taken on an active role in transforming new research results and ideas created at the university and in the region into path breaking business and start-up concepts.

The university supports through its centre the creation of successful ventures and promotes a culture of entrepreneurship by offering entrepreneurship courses for students in a large number of faculties as well as advanced trainings for researchers, staff and partners. The centre supports start-up teams and organizes regular networking and experience- sharing events at the university.

- We need to achieve excellence in research and in teaching by fostering highly integrated public-private networks, composed of businesses, entrepreneurs, universities, research institutes and technology centres. In this respect, we hope that the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) will play an important role and its first Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) will soon produce new innovation models and inspire others to emulate them.

Conclusions

- Universities will play an important role in view of the global challenges ahead. To meet the future needs of modern societies, the mission of higher education must be more closely aligned with the reality of labour markets.
- To succeed in the race for the brightest and to make innovation and entrepreneurship a priority is crucial to preserve Europe's economic prosperity.
