



18 November 2010

MEETING BETWEEN THE TROIKA OF THE EDUCATION COUNCIL AND SOCIAL PARTNERS, BRUSSELS, 18 NOVEMBER 2010

**SPEECH BY STEVEN D'HAESELEER
DIRECTOR, SOCIAL AFFAIRS**

Ministers, Commissioner, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Much has happened since our last opportunity to meet in this Troika setting. Europe has come a long way in recovering from the crisis. However, I don't need to tell you that governments across the EU are still struggling to get public finances in order and to set the right priorities of how to spend scarce resources. It is more important than ever to invest wisely in future growth areas. We believe that education is such an area.

It is easy to understand why education is at the heart of business concerns. In order for companies to be competitive, they need a work force with skills of high quality and relevance, measured against a baseline of the world's best education systems.

The value that European employers attribute to the skills of their employees was demonstrated in the recent economic crisis. Although forced to take drastic measures to ensure their survival, companies have taken far-reaching measures to avoid laying off employees, mainly explained by the latter's high level of skills and competencies. Only the day before yesterday, survey results from EUROFOUND showed that more workers are receiving training paid for by their employers than at any time since the start of the survey in 1991.

At an EU level, BUSINESSEUROPE and its members are committed to contribute to an efficient implementation of the tools for transparency between education systems. We are active in over 20 working groups, steering groups and committees dealing with education in different ways.

European cooperation in VET and the Bruges communiqué

One important landmark for us is the adoption of the Bruges communiqué, setting the priorities for European cooperation in vocational education and training for the next ten years. Tomorrow's meeting will obviously be very important in this respect.

I wish to highlight a few key points from the perspective of employers.

Firstly, enabling the shift towards a learning outcome approach in national qualification and credit systems should be the core priority for the continuation of the Copenhagen process, cutting transversely through all cooperation and transparency tools.



Secondly, governments in the EU Member States all wish to see business invest and become more engaged in education and training. But this means that governments should put in place the right framework conditions for companies to become further involved. In order to encourage this, a first step is to strip bureaucracy, for instance surrounding the provision of apprenticeships. Moreover, governments should also address the resistance of educational providers, including at primary and secondary level, to collaborate with companies.

Thirdly, the quality and relevance of vocational education and training must not be compromised for any reason. Only by aiming for excellence and skills that respond to the needs of the labour market will VET become an attractive learning option. In so doing, it will be even more effective in contributing to social inclusion.

A European Learning Area

These messages could just as easily have been addressing what needs to be done when it comes to higher education. For instance, overcoming the scepticism of education providers to create links with companies might be even more of a challenge when it comes to higher education. Governments should look into possibilities to put in place positive incentives to encourage collaborations between education and business.

And that brings me to the next topic: the lack of cooperation between the cooperation instruments themselves. The development towards the European Higher Education Area, the European Research Area, The European Area of Lifelong Learning and the cooperation in VET are ambitious and important processes. However, these processes must not continue to develop separately from each other.

By contrast, a more concordant approach with increased interoperability between their respective instruments must be pursued. This should enable individual learners to transfer easily from one education system to another, across borders as well as between different levels and learning environments.

Youth on the Move

Broadening the context of European education policies even more, a few words on the Youth on the Move.

BUSINESSEUROPE welcomes the fact that employment and education policies are addressed jointly in Youth on the Move communication as this has not always been the case. We expect the same from the upcoming New Skills and Jobs agenda. Nevertheless, we warn against an approach to matching skills supply and demand by only focusing on skills forecasting and the launch of new EU-level structures (such as ESCO).

Obstacles to a better match lie primarily on the national level. Rather than producing a never ending stream of new tools to try to fix this, the EU should encourage Member States remove these obstacles. For instance, by facilitating for employers to be involved in the development of courses, as well as in the management of education institutions, a flexible process of continuous adaption of the education and training to labour market needs will be created.



Conclusion

In view of the Bruges communiqué, the key messages from employers are to focus on ensuring a shift towards the learning outcome approach, to create the right framework conditions for companies to become further involved in education and training and to ensure VET of high quality and relevance.

This is an important opportunity to highlight these messages and we wish to thank the Belgian presidency for inviting us to the dinner. We look forward to the upcoming Hungarian presidency pursuing this tradition.

* * *