



COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION



## **Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education**

*3128th EDUCATION, YOUTH, CULTURE and SPORT Council meeting  
Brussels, 28 and 29 November 2011*

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

WHEREAS

1. Higher education systems play a crucial role in the creation of knowledge which underpins human and societal development and the promotion of active citizenship.
2. The *Europe 2020* strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth adopted in June 2010<sup>1</sup> set the specific objective of improving education levels, in particular by increasing the share of young people having successfully completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40% by 2020.
3. The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999 established an intergovernmental process aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area which is actively supported by the European Union, and the Ministers responsible for higher education in the participating countries, meeting in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve on 28 and 29 April 2009, called for higher education institutions<sup>2</sup> to further modernise their activities in the period up to 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> EUCO 13/10.

<sup>2</sup> In order to take account of linguistic diversity and national traditions and practices, this term is used to encompass all tertiary education institutions, including universities, universities of applied science, institutes of technology, *grandes écoles*, business schools, engineering schools, IUT, colleges of higher education, professional schools, polytechnics, academies, etc.

# **P R E S S**

4. Council Directive 2004/114/EC of 13 December 2004 determined the conditions and rules for admitting third-country nationals to the territory of the Member States for a period exceeding three months for the purposes of studies, pupil exchange, unremunerated training or voluntary service<sup>3</sup>.
5. Council Directive 2005/71/EC of 12 October 2005 laid down the conditions for the admission of third-country researchers to the Member States for more than three months for the purposes of carrying out a research project under hosting agreements with research organisations<sup>4</sup>.
6. The Council Resolution of 23 November 2007 on modernising universities for Europe's competitiveness in a global knowledge economy<sup>5</sup> invited Member States to promote the internationalisation of higher education institutions by encouraging quality assurance through independent evaluation and peer review of universities, enhancing mobility, promoting the use of joint and double degrees and facilitating the recognition of qualifications and periods of study.
7. The Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training<sup>6</sup> stated that in order to support Member States' efforts to modernise higher education and develop a European Higher Education Area, close synergy with the Bologna process should be aimed for, in particular with regard to quality assurance, recognition, mobility and transparency instruments.
8. The conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 26 November 2009 on developing the role of education in a fully- functioning knowledge triangle<sup>7</sup> identified the need to reform further the governance and financing structures of universities allowing for greater autonomy and accountability, so as to facilitate a more diversified revenue stream and more effective collaboration with the business world and to equip universities to participate in the knowledge triangle on a global scale.
9. The Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the internationalisation of higher education<sup>8</sup> invited the Commission to develop an EU international higher education strategy aimed at improving coherence and complementarity between existing international cooperation initiatives at both EU and national level, and which will continue to promote the attractiveness of European higher education, research and innovation in the EU's external activities.

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<sup>3</sup> OJ L 375, 23.12.2004, pp. 12-18.

<sup>4</sup> OJ L 289, 3.11.2005, pp. 15-22.

<sup>5</sup> 16096/1/07 REV 1.

<sup>6</sup> OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, pp. 2-10.

<sup>7</sup> OJ C 302, 12.12.2009, pp. 3-5.

<sup>8</sup> OJ C 135, 26.5.2010, pp.12-14.

10. The Council conclusions of 7 June 2010 on new skills for new jobs: the way forward<sup>9</sup> underlined the need to promote inclusive growth and to help people of all ages to anticipate and manage change by equipping them with the right skills and competences.
11. The Council conclusions of 19 November 2010 on the *Youth on the Move* initiative<sup>10</sup> called for efforts to enhance the quality and attractiveness of education at all levels, particularly in higher education.
12. The Council conclusions of 26 November 2010 on Innovation Union for Europe<sup>11</sup> stressed the importance of prioritising investment in education, training and research, and of making full use of Europe's intellectual capital in order to secure long-term competitiveness and growth.
13. The conclusions of the European Council of 4 February 2011 called for the implementation of a strategic and integrated approach to boosting innovation and taking full advantage of Europe's intellectual capital, for the benefit of citizens, companies - in particular SMEs – and researchers<sup>12</sup>.
14. The Council conclusions of 14 February 2011 on the role of education and training in the implementation of the *Europe 2020* strategy<sup>13</sup> emphasised that higher education institutions should seek to improve the quality and relevance of the courses they offer, so as to encourage a wider range of citizens to enrol in higher education, and that reinforced cooperation should be promoted between higher education institutions, research institutes and enterprises with a view to strengthening the knowledge triangle as the basis for a more innovative and creative economy.
15. The Council conclusions of 19 May 2011 on an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020<sup>14</sup> invited the Member States to set or continue working towards their goals that could focus on ensuring equal access in practice to quality education, including higher education.
16. The Council conclusions of 31 May 2011 on the development of the European Research Area (ERA) through ERA-related groups<sup>15</sup> noted that the considerable progress achieved in implementing ERA should result in a continuation of the comprehensive and strategic approach to take full advantage of Europe's intellectual capital.

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<sup>9</sup> doc. 10841/10.

<sup>10</sup> OJ C 326, 3.12.2010, pp. 9.11.

<sup>11</sup> Doc. 17165/10.

<sup>12</sup> EUCO 2/11, p.6, para. 16.

<sup>13</sup> OJ C 70, 4.3.2011, p.1.

<sup>14</sup> Doc. 10658/11.

<sup>15</sup> 11032/11.

17. The Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 : *Youth on the Move* - Promoting the learning mobility of young people<sup>16</sup> noted that learning mobility can make education and training systems and institutions more open, more European and international, more accessible and more efficient. It can also strengthen Europe's competitiveness by helping to build a knowledge-intensive society.
18. The Council conclusions of 28 November 2011 on a benchmark for learning mobility seek to increase the participation of higher education students in learning mobility and set quantitative and qualitative thresholds for measuring the periods of higher education-related study or training abroad.
19. The European Union has a long tradition of cooperation with third countries based on a set of policies and instruments in which higher education is playing an increasing role. Cooperation in higher education also features prominently in multilateral cooperation frameworks such as the Eastern Partnership, the Union for the Mediterranean or the Northern Dimension, and with the Western Balkans.

#### IN THE LIGHT OF

1. The first ministerial ERA conference on *Intellectual Capital – Creative Impact* held in Sopot on 20 July 2011, which highlighted the role that universities play in a globalised world as vital sources of knowledge and innovative thinking, especially with regard to strategic areas of research focused on contemporary challenges.
2. The Presidency conference on the *Modernisation of Higher Education* held in Sopot on 24-25 October 2011, which underlined the need to modernise higher education systems, especially in the face of current-day challenges such as global competition and demographic trends.

#### WELCOMES

The Communication of 20 September 2011 from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - *Supporting growth and jobs - an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> OJ C 199, 7.7.2011, pp. 1-5.

<sup>17</sup> Doc. 14198/11 + ADD 1.

## ACKNOWLEDGES THAT

1. In the current economic climate higher education (including tertiary vocational education and training) - through its links with research and innovation - has a crucial role to play in providing the highly skilled human capital and promoting the essential research that Europe needs in its drive to secure jobs, economic growth and prosperity.
2. Graduates' qualifications do not always match the needs of the labour market and society. Public and private employers increasingly report mismatches and difficulties in finding the right people for the evolving needs of the knowledge economy.
3. Europe needs far greater numbers of trained researchers and researchers with experience outside academia, including from the private sector, in order to make its economies more research-intensive and thereby boost innovation and competitiveness.
4. Widening participation in higher education requires growing attention to be paid to the challenges related to quality and diversity.
5. The strength of European higher education institutions lies in their diversity, in the provision of high quality, sustainable, relevant education and research, and in the link between institutional autonomy, accountability to all stakeholders, and an ability to adapt to changing circumstances. In addition to their two traditional missions of teaching and research, a third mission linking institutions and the business sector, including at regional level, and encompassing social responsibility is of growing importance.
6. However, the potential of European higher education institutions to fulfil their role in society and contribute to Europe's prosperity remains underexploited: Europe is lagging behind in the global competition for knowledge and talent, while emerging economies are rapidly increasing their investment in higher education.
7. At the same time, higher education institutions too often seek to compete in too many areas, while only a few of them achieve excellence in specific areas where global competition is strong.
8. Higher education institutions thus need to continue pursuing internal reforms based on the choice of institutional missions related to the types of intellectual capital they represent and opportunities to define themselves in relation to other national institutions.
9. Institutional autonomy is needed to promote institutional diversity within national systems of higher education: there is a need to diversify institutional roles and missions in order to promote excellence within higher education institutions.

## AGREES THAT

1. The main responsibility for delivering and supporting reforms in higher education rests with Member States and education institutions themselves. However, the Bologna Process and consequent development of the European Higher Education Area, the EU agenda for the modernisation of higher education systems and the creation of the European Research Area show that the challenges and policy responses required transcend national borders and that European cooperation has a valuable contribution to make in terms of funding support, evidence-based policy analysis and the exchange of best practice.
2. The quality and relevance of higher education are a core condition for taking full advantage of Europe's intellectual capital.
3. The quality of education and research is a key driver of the successful modernisation of higher education systems in Europe.
4. Strengthening the knowledge triangle between education, research and innovation is a key condition for enabling higher education to contribute to jobs and growth, for reforming governance and financing structures, and for enhancing its international attractiveness.
5. Developing the European Research Area increases complementarity between national systems to enhance the cost effectiveness of research investment and to intensify exchanges and cooperation between institutions collaborating in the knowledge triangle.
6. The international mobility of students, researchers and staff, which has been reinforced since the launching of the European Higher Education Area, has a positive impact on quality and affects all key areas of reform. However, it can also pose challenges for some education systems which receive substantial inflows of students, or for those countries threatened by a "brain drain" which results in many talented people choosing to study, and then remain, abroad.
7. Attracting the best students, academics and researchers from outside the EU and developing new forms of cross-border cooperation are key conditions for making the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area attractive destinations in the global race for knowledge and talent.
8. Involving employers and other stakeholders in the design and delivery of programmes is essential in terms of improving the quality and relevance of higher education.
9. Public investment, supported by additional sources of funding, should remain the basis for sustainable higher education, especially in view of the current financial crisis in Europe.

ACCORDINGLY INVITES THE MEMBER STATES - IN LINE WITH NATIONAL PRACTICE - TO WORK WITH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, WHILE RECOGNISING THEIR AUTONOMY, AS WELL AS WITH ALL RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS, IN ORDER TO:

1. Step up efforts to increase higher education attainment levels to achieve the *Europe 2020* education headline target of 40% of 30-34 year olds in the EU having completed tertiary or equivalent education, given the estimate that - by 2020 - 35% of all jobs in the EU will require high-level qualifications<sup>18</sup>.
2. Develop clear progression routes into higher education from vocational and other types of education, as well as mechanisms for recognising prior learning and experience gained outside formal education and training, especially by tackling challenges related to the implementation and use of national qualification frameworks linked to the European Qualification Framework.
3. Promote the systematic development of effective strategies to ensure access for disadvantaged and under-represented groups, especially by improving outreach and by providing more transparent information on educational opportunities and outcomes, as well as better guidance in order to ensure the right choice of study.
4. Increase efforts to minimise higher education drop-out rates by improving the quality, relevance and attractiveness of courses, in particular through student-centred learning and by providing relevant post-entry support, guidance and counselling.
5. Ensure that targeted financial support reaches potential students from lower income backgrounds.
6. Encourage the use of skills and growth projections and graduate employment data (including tracking graduate employment outcomes) in course design, delivery and evaluation, as well as encourage greater flexibility when designing study programmes, including interdisciplinary learning paths, with a view to enhancing graduates' employability.
7. Encourage the adoption of student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, acknowledging the needs of a diverse student body and promoting a greater variety of study modes, including by making effective use of ICTs.
8. Encourage higher education institutions to invest in the continuous professional development of their staff, and to reward excellence in teaching.

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<sup>18</sup> Cedefop report 2010.

9. Tackle stereotyping and dismantle the barriers still faced by women in reaching the highest levels in post-graduate education and research - especially in certain disciplines and in leadership positions - in order to liberate untapped talent.
10. Link, where relevant and appropriate, national funding for doctoral programmes to the Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training<sup>19</sup>, and support the development of researcher career opportunities.
11. Stimulate the development of entrepreneurial, creative and innovation skills in all disciplines and in all cycles, and promote innovation in higher education through more interactive learning environments and a strengthened knowledge-transfer infrastructure.
12. Encourage, where relevant, a greater role for interdisciplinary research in higher education institutions, as well as enhance interlinkages between higher education and research, in order to make the knowledge triangle work more efficiently.
13. In addition to the education and research missions of higher education, encourage the further development of third stream activities such as knowledge-sharing and innovation, community engagement, lifelong learning, and relevance to regional and local development.
14. Encourage partnership and cooperation with business, for instance through reward structures, internships and work placements, incentives for multidisciplinary and cross-organisational cooperation, and the reduction of regulatory and administrative barriers to partnerships between higher education institutions and other public and private stakeholders. The effective transfer of knowledge to the market, and in this context the continuum between basic and applied research, can be achieved by implementing public policies which enhance partnerships between a wide range of entities.
15. Strengthen links between higher education institutions, employers and labour market institutions in order to take greater account of labour market needs in study programmes, to improve the match between skills and jobs, and to develop active labour market policies aimed at promoting graduate employment.

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<sup>19</sup> Report adopted by the ERA Steering Group on Human Resources and Mobility in May and finalised on 27 June 2011.



16. Strengthen quality through mobility and cross-border cooperation, including by:
  - a. building learning mobility more systematically into curricula, where appropriate, and ensuring the efficient recognition of credits gained abroad through the effective use of transparency tools such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement, quality assurance and the European Qualifications Framework;
  - b. eliminating unnecessary barriers to switching institutions between bachelor and master levels and to cross-border cooperation and exchanges;
  - c. improving access, employment conditions and progression opportunities for students, researchers and teachers from non-EU countries, including - where possible - by resolving administrative issues that create difficulties in obtaining visas;
  - d. ensuring that quality assurance systems adequately cover franchise education;
  - e. promoting wider institutional cooperation, including by developing courses leading to double and joint degrees.
17. Encourage more flexible governance and funding systems in higher education institutions, including mechanisms linked to performance and competition, as well as promote the professionalisation of internal management.
18. Facilitate access to alternative sources of funding, including - where appropriate - by using public funds to leverage private and other public investment.

#### WELCOMES THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO

1. Support the Member States in their efforts to reform their higher education systems, making full use of EU programmes in the field of education and training, and by means of an improved evidence base, detailed analysis and increased transparency, including by:
  - a. developing, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, an independent, performance-based transparency tool for profiling higher education institutions ("U-Multirank"), which takes account of the specificity of national higher education systems and acknowledges the diversity of higher education institutions across Europe, as well as allows users to create individualised multidimensional rankings;
  - b. continuing to develop better higher education and labour market intelligence, in particular by improving data on European higher education learning mobility and employment outcomes (operating within available resources and minimising administrative burdens), and by providing specific guidance on raising basic and transversal skills and overcoming skill mismatches;
  - c. analysing the impact of different funding approaches towards the diversification, efficiency and equity of higher education systems, as well as on student mobility;

- d. establishing a high level expert group to analyse key topics for the modernisation of higher education, starting with the promotion of excellence in teaching, with a view to reporting back in 2013.
2. Facilitate the increase of learning mobility by strengthening the ECTS and quality assurance mechanisms, with a view to improving recognition.
3. Propose, without prejudice to the forthcoming negotiations on the future EU programme in the fields of education training and youth, an Erasmus Masters degree mobility scheme, in order to promote mobility, excellence and access to affordable finance for students taking their Masters degree in another Member State, regardless of their social background.
4. Support the analysis of mobility flows and of developments in franchise education.
5. Promote, together with the Member States, the coherent development of the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area, and seek to strengthen synergies between the EU and Bologna Process, including by use of the post-2013 programme in the field of education and training, with a view to contributing to the Bologna and EU 20% mobility target.
6. Continue to develop the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) by adopting the proposal for a new strategic innovation agenda designing the future of the EIT, its priorities and proposals for new KICs to be launched, especially in order to increase the innovation potential of higher education institutions in cooperation with business.
7. Support the implementation of open and transparent recruitment procedures and foster cross-border and cross-sectoral researcher mobility by promoting the European Framework for Research Careers and the European initiative *EURAXESS – Researchers in Motion*<sup>20</sup>.
8. Strengthen - within the Marie Curie actions - the mobility schemes targeted at doctoral students, including support for reintegration, and promote a European Industrial PhD scheme in order to support applied research.
9. Propose a quality framework for traineeships in order to help students and graduates gain the practical knowledge needed for the workplace and obtain more and better quality placements.

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<sup>20</sup> Report adopted by the ERA Steering Group on Human Resources and Mobility in May 2011 and finalised on 21 July 2011.

10. Promote the EU as a study and research destination for top talent from around the world, whilst recognising the diversity of higher education institutions, and develop relations in the field of higher education with partners outside the Union, with a view to strengthening national higher education systems, policy dialogue, mobility and academic recognition, including via the Enlargement Strategy, the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, cooperation with the Western Balkans, the Global Approach to Migration, and the Bologna Policy Forum.
  11. Develop an EU international higher education strategy in order to better reach the abovementioned goals, increasing international outreach and visibility, as well as engaging with partners with a view to strengthening relationships and enhancing capacity building in the higher education sector.
  12. Strengthen the long-term impact of EU funding for higher education modernisation through improved complementarity between different funding instruments, notably the future EU programme in the fields of education, training and youth, the *Horizon 2020* Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and the European Cohesion Policy instruments."
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