

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission: Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy**

(2006/C 81/05)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

**Having regard to** the *Communication from the Commission: Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy* (COM(2005) 152 final);

**Having regard to** the decision of the European Commission of 3 June 2005 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

**Having regard to** the decision of its Bureau of 12 April 2005 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject;

**Having regard to** the decision of the Lisbon European Council approving the concept of the European Research Area and thus laying the foundations for a common European policy on science and technology;

**Having regard to** the opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the *Mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy* (CdR 152/2004 fin) <sup>(1)</sup>;

**Having regard to** the *Communication from the Commission 'The role of universities in the Europe of knowledge'* <sup>(2)</sup> and the outlook opinion of the CoR on *The role of universities in local and regional development within the context of a Europe of knowledge* (CdR 89/2003 fin) <sup>(3)</sup>;

**Having regard to** the opinion of the Committee of the Regions on *Establishing an integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning* (CdR 258/2004 fin);

**Having regard to** the opinion of the Commission for Culture and Education, adopted on 11 July 2005 (CdR 154/2005 rev. 1) (rapporteur: Mr Gerd Harms, Delegate to the Federation and for European Affairs of the Land of Brandenburg, State Secretary in the State Chancellery (DE/PES));

Whereas:

1. the Commission's Communication must be seen in the context of the general European 'Growth Through Knowledge' strategy. A society's capacity to innovate depends on education and research. The objectives of the Lisbon Strategy can only be achieved by means of global competition in which research, education and training play a key role. This means that universities have a key role to play in the Lisbon process;
2. in 20 years time, only 5 % of the world's population will live and work in Europe, compared with 52 % in Asia. These statistics reflect the urgent need for radical measures to make the European educational and research environment more attractive. The attractiveness of universities is a key factor in Europe's efforts to build up the brainpower which it needs to secure its future;
3. access to education must be as inclusive as possible, not only in order to secure the future of a Europe of knowledge, but also to serve as a basis for the social cohesion of European countries and of Europe as a whole. The main challenges faced at all levels are to remove barriers to education, to make lifelong learning options available to all, and to enhance the quality of education systems;
4. as part of its efforts to give the Lisbon strategy a new impetus, the European Commission has proposed a package of measures to meet these challenges proactively. The Seventh Research Framework Programme is one of the main activities within the remit of the European Commission. Reforms of education and higher education are needed to ensure that the potential identified in the framework programme can be incorporated into the European innovation process;

<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 43, 18.2.2005, p. 1.

<sup>(2)</sup> COM(2003) 58 final.

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 73, 23.3.2004, p. 22.

5. the European regions, which have significant powers in relation to scientific education and research, have a special role to play in this process. The Committee of the Regions recognises that local and regional authorities have a special role to play, particularly as a communication channel to all citizens. Local and regional authorities can also promote collaboration between networks in order to create synergies between the various stakeholders. The development of European regions is closely dependent on how they use scientific, research and innovation potential. The process of building up this potential in Europe can only succeed with the involvement of the regions;

**unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 61st plenary session (meeting of 12 October), held on 12-13 October 2005:**

## 1. The Committee of the Regions' views and recommendations

### General comments

The Committee of the Regions

1.1 **welcomes** the *Communication from the Commission: Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy*, and **sees** it as an important boost for the much-needed Europe-wide debate on improving university education;

1.2 **reiterates** that higher education establishments and universities, referred to as 'universities' in the Communication, are very diverse. The present opinion also uses the term in this broader sense;

1.3 **shares** the Commission's view that future growth and social welfare will rely increasingly on knowledge-intensive industries and services, and that ever more jobs will require tertiary qualifications;

1.4 **acknowledges** the need for a fundamental shift in European higher education policy, taking into account the needs of local and regional authorities while enabling research and teaching of sufficient standard to compete at international level;

1.5 would **point out** in this context that there are excellent universities in Europe, where research achievements and the teaching of future scientists are outstanding even by international standards; however, at the same time there are many universities which are unable to deliver their full potential, as discussed in the Commission's Communication;

1.6 **welcomes** the clear reference to subsidiarity, but would **place additional emphasis** on the role of the regions, as set out in the White Paper on *European Governance 2001* and enshrined in the draft constitutional Treaty;

1.7 **emphasises** that, economic considerations aside, university education also offers social and cultural added value which, although not measurable in terms of economic benefits, still constitutes the foundation of a developed society;

1.8 **emphasises** that the ambitious goals which prompted the Communication can only be achieved if the basic conditions are in place in terms of general school and pre-school education, and **acknowledges** that the regional level has a special role to play here;

1.9 **believes** that universities should be more closely involved in the concept of lifelong learning with a view to achieving the objectives of the Lisbon strategy;

1.10 is of the **opinion** that rapidly changing social expectations of higher education can be most effectively met by means of flexible structures. Although establishing such structures is primarily a matter for universities, national and regional government also bear responsibility for ensuring that the conditions for flexibility are in place by removing legal restrictions and providing the necessary resources;

1.11 **regrets** that the European Commission was unable to draft an inter-departmental communication covering all aspects of European higher education policy, including research. The European Research Area and the 'Regions of Knowledge' heading in the Commission's proposal for the Seventh Research Framework Programme are of special relevance to higher education in Europe, particularly with regard to achieving the Lisbon objectives;

1.12 **notes** that treating research as a separate category severs the link between research, training of future scientists and academic qualifications for a scientific career, and between university and non-university research.

## 2. Increasing challenges

The Committee of the Regions

2.1 **shares** the Commission's **concern** that the educational resources of European countries are not being sufficiently developed, and considers the Commission's analysis to be a useful basis for approaching areas in which change is needed;

2.2 **feels, however,** that the statistics included in the Communication give a distorted picture of the actual situation in many European countries. In particular, the low percentage of university students and graduates does not take into account the many European students studying at polytechnics or participating in vocational training, whereas in North America and Asia comparable courses are offered by universities;

2.3 **agrees with the analysis** of factors preventing dynamic development of the higher education sector, in particular a marked tendency for universities to isolate themselves from business and society, over-regulation of higher education systems due to ex-ante checks by government, and the relative poverty of the European higher education sector as a result of its dependency on state funding;

2.4 would **emphasise** that the quality of higher education establishments in Europe is still generally high, and that many universities have long since undertaken the necessary changes described in the Communication, or are in the process of doing so, although in many cases without deliberately aligning themselves with the Lisbon objectives. The fact that many universities have not heard of the Bologna process does not warrant a negative assessment of European universities;

2.5 **supports** the endeavours of the Bologna process to set up a common higher education area, but **notes** that this should reflect the diversity of national and regional approaches to higher education. The Committee of the Regions does not share the concerns expressed in the Communication with regard to linguistic diversity.

### 3. The core modernisation agenda: attractiveness, governance, funding

The Committee of the Regions

3.1 **reiterates its view** that the Bologna process sets concrete and relevant objectives for developing higher education in the EU, with the aim of creating a European area of higher education by the year 2010. In particular, these concern adopting a system of comparable degrees, based on two-cycle credit systems, mobility, quality assurance and promotion of the European dimension. The Committee **notes** that not enough has yet been done to achieve these objectives, and that not only universities, but also regions, Member States and the European Union will have to step up their efforts;

3.2 **shares** the Commission's **view** that universities need local support in order to make the necessary changes. Local and regional authorities have long collaborated with universities and other establishments to provide support for the requisite measures;

3.3 **welcomes** the call for an across-the-board 'culture of excellence', and sees scientific faculties and networks of innovative scientists as key players in the process of calling for and

promoting excellence. Incentives for excellence in teaching and research must be consistently enhanced and supported;

3.4 **acknowledges and agrees** with the Commission's analysis of the factors involved in making universities more attractive. Human resources is one area in which there are numerous opportunities for universities to become more European in outlook;

3.5 **welcomes** the Erasmus programme's more ambitious aim to cover 3 million students;

3.6 **endorses** the Commission's view that partnership between higher education and industry is especially important, but feels that other areas of the economy, public administration, culture and social organisations are partners. Given the contribution of science to regional development, the restriction to partnerships with industry is too narrow;

3.7 **is concerned** that universities have not yet sufficiently taken on board the need to open themselves up to new groups of learners, to emphasise lifelong learning and to offer wider access to academic education, as essential conditions for coping with demographic and structural changes over the next few decades. It therefore **welcomes** moves to place this issue at the top of the agenda for a Europe-wide debate, and promises to support the Commission in doing so;

3.8 **notes** that competition and rising standards in higher education must not cause European regions to drift apart in terms of scientific achievements; Europe is characterised by its broad educational base, and this must be preserved. Every European region must have higher education facilities which meet European quality standards;

3.9 **emphasises** that, while the Commission's call for more and better financial backing for universities is understandable, it does not adequately reflect the actual circumstances of many European regions, where (non-higher) education and training are often the budgetary priorities;

3.10 **stresses** that the local and regional authorities represented in the Committee of the Regions are willing to enter into joint discussions with universities on institutional modernisation strategies, and to implement them wherever possible. This would involve multi-annual contracts, support for innovative university management and even greater openness on the part of universities to partnerships with industry.

### 4. Priorities for action

The Committee of the Regions

4.1 **recommends** compiling a summary of priorities in the fields of education, higher education and research, in order to focus attention on links and on the resulting options for implementation of the Lisbon strategy;

4.2 **emphasises** that comprehensive and Europe-wide recognition of degrees is a pre-condition for effective structural change in universities. The quantitative comparability of studies envisaged by the Bologna process is an important basis for such recognition. To ensure equitable and effective access to the European Higher Education Area for all regions, it would be useful to build on such measures by launching a debate at European level on qualitative standards;

4.3 **points out** that Marie Curie actions have already proved useful in promoting the mobility of scientists under the European research framework programme. Additional measures at European level in this area as suggested in the Communication would dissipate resources and makes no sense. The Committee encourages the Commission to further strengthen the Marie Curie actions promoting mobility of scientists and to take steps to improve the conditions for mobility, as set out in the European Charter for Researchers;

4.4 **emphasises** that the debate on study fees can only be conducted in a national or regional context;

4.5 **rejects** the Commission's proposal to guide student choices by introducing differential fee and grant systems. The freedom of individuals to make educational choices must not be constrained by attempts at state control;

4.6 **endorses** the Commission's view that all sources of EU funding should be mobilised for the modernisation of universities, **but urges the Commission** to include appropriate provisions in the Structural Funds regulations to strengthen the position of science in the competition for national resources, and to emphasise the need for development in the field of higher education;

4.7 **emphasises** the need for universities to have as much freedom in organising teaching and research as possible, within the framework of national and regional remits. Strategic multi-annual framework agreements should be used to define the balance between freedom and responsibility, thus enabling transparent and effective ex-post surveillance of progress towards objectives. With this in mind, the Committee of the Regions would emphasise the role of the regions in the development of higher education and the contribution of universities to regional development.

4.8 **calls on** the Commission to take appropriate measures to achieve recognition for regions, municipalities and towns in the context of boosting the regional involvement of universities and research institutes, stimulating interaction between science, business and public administration, and enhancing the social impact of scientific institutions. This could be achieved through a competition.

Brussels, 12 October 2005.

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions  
Peter STRAUB

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