

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'modernisation of higher education'

(2012/C 113/09)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- welcomes the European Commission's intention to play a more active role in supporting higher education institutions and the various national, regional and local authorities in implementing the agenda for the modernisation of higher education;
- shares the European Commission's view that total investment in higher education in Europe is too low, and acknowledges that both Member States and, in many cases, regional governments must take responsibility for increasing public investment in higher education;
- urges the European Commission to pay even closer attention, when drafting specific programmes and lines of action, to one of the priorities that it has itself set for Member States and higher education institutions: increasing participation and boosting the "social dimension" of higher education to that end;
- believes that the relevance of higher education can also be seen in the extent to which higher education institutions meet typically regional or local needs, thus making a real contribution to local or regional development;
- notes that a great deal still needs to be done to expand and consolidate opportunities for learning mobility and cross-border cooperation, and thus to increase the added value of such opportunities significantly;
- reiterates that local and regional authorities have key responsibilities in education and training, just as in youth and employment policies, and therefore points out that such authorities have a vital role to play in implementing the modernisation agenda, in full respect of the subsidiarity principle.

Rapporteur	Mia DE VITS (BE/PES), Member of the Flemish Parliament
Reference document	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on <i>Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems</i>
	COM(2011) 567 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. General comments

1. welcomes the communication on *Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems*, in which the European Commission sets out the key policy issues in reforming higher education. The CoR appreciates the additional impetus that the European Commission thus wishes to give to the reforms that started with the Bologna process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area but are still far from complete; it also appreciates the fact that the Commission is giving these reforms a prominent place in the broader framework of the Europe 2020 strategy and its flagship initiatives;

2. endorses the approach that the European Commission has taken in the communication, first summarising the key policy objectives that both Member States and higher education institutions need to achieve by the end of the decade, and then setting out how it can support them in implementing this modernisation agenda;

3. agrees that the main responsibility for delivering reforms in higher education, a policy area where the EU has coordinating and supporting competences, rests with Member States and education institutions themselves, even though the challenges and policy responses transcend national borders. The CoR also reiterates that local and regional authorities have key responsibilities in education and training, just as in youth and employment policies, and therefore points out that such authorities have a vital role to play in implementing the modernisation agenda, in full respect of the subsidiarity principle;

4. notes that the proposed strategy for modernising higher education does not appear to raise any issue regarding its compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

5. notes that education, including higher education, must above all give people a broad, general basis for developing their talents to the maximum and growing into strong, open and multi-faceted individuals who can assume their responsibility in society to the full. Education does undeniably also have economic value, but this is not its only value, and approaching

education from an economic perspective will therefore inevitably always be unsatisfactory. Nonetheless, in certain contexts an economic approach may be useful and even necessary;

6. despite this, fully agrees that education and training must be given a key role in achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe, and notes that European higher education institutions can still find ways to fulfil their social role;

2. Key issues for Member States and for higher education institutions

2.1 *Increasing attainment levels to provide the graduates and researchers Europe needs*

7. agrees with the analysis that average attainment levels in Europe need to reach the target of 40% of young people completing higher education or equivalent studies by 2020 in order to meet the requirements of the projected and necessary growth in knowledge-intensive jobs, to give young people better prospects for good jobs and thus also to reduce unemployment, particularly youth unemployment;

8. is convinced that the widespread use of innovative ICT solutions by higher education providers can contribute to making higher education more easily accessible and to increasing participation rates, for example for students living in sparsely-populated areas, on islands, in mountain regions and in the outermost regions;

9. specifically agrees with the position that, to this end, a broader cross-section of society needs to be attracted into higher education, where regrettably certain sections of the population are still significantly under-represented. The CoR notes that this under-representation – which has persisted unacceptably among university teaching staff in particular – not only raises social issues, but is also, from an economic point of view, a waste of talent;

10. therefore suggests monitoring not just Member States' progress in increasing participation – and, just as crucially, success – in higher education, but also the extent to which they can attract students from under-represented groups and "non-traditional" students, in a way that breaks with conventional role models and thus combats stereotypical study choices and the resulting segregation of the labour market. In view of demographic changes, the CoR is convinced that the substantial increase in participation that is needed cannot be achieved over

the long term unless Member States and higher education institutions can allow this social dimension to permeate to the very heart of their higher education policy. It therefore considers it essential to set specific objectives also in this regard, tailored to the particular context in each Member State and in their different regions; stresses, however, that increased participation also requires increased funding for Europe's higher education institutions in order to guarantee top standards of research and teaching;

11. supports the European Commission's call to ensure that financial support reaches potential students from lower income backgrounds and, in this connection, finds it concerning that a number of Member States have decided to raise tuition fees, or are considering doing so, despite the fact that all EU Member States have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 13 of which states, *inter alia*, that "higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education". The CoR fears that increasing tuition fees will also increase the financial threshold to higher education, just at a time when many students and their families are suffering the impact of the financial and economic crisis;

12. points out that factors other than ability to pay (such as the thought given to choosing a course, adequate prior education or action to make up for this if lacking, study and careers counselling, redirecting students to a more suitable path or course at an early stage to avoid them dropping out of higher education, a more student-centred approach to higher education, etc.) may play a decisive role in access to and success in higher education, and urges Member States and higher education institutions also to pay appropriate attention to these factors. It is regrettable that policy information on these issues is not gathered and disseminated among the Member States systematically enough, as is done for other aspects of higher education, and the Observatory on the Social Dimension in Higher Education currently being developed as part of the Bologna process must therefore be given the support it needs;

13. welcomes the measures proposed by the European Commission, such as developing national qualification frameworks providing clear (and, where necessary, additional) progression routes between different levels of education, and focusing on learning outcomes and on knowledge and skills gained in practical contexts (*inter alia* by recognising skills and competences previously acquired elsewhere, including in informal and non-formal education) instead of more formal, traditional criteria such as study duration and the number of contact hours in a programme of study. The CoR feels that such measures may be effective tools in evaluating competences more accurately and assigning people to the correct skills level, or in putting them on an appropriate and feasible path to higher-level qualifications;

14. strongly urges the European Commission itself to also consistently maintain its progressive approach to flexible

learning pathways and forms of learning, including when applying the current Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications and when drafting its successor;

2.2 Improving the quality and relevance of higher education

15. agrees that higher education would greatly benefit from closer contact with the world of work and labour market institutions, in as much as it is designed to provide the knowledge and key transferable skills necessary for success in highly skilled jobs. At the same time, the CoR feels that the world of work could take on more responsibility with regard to higher education, for example by providing sufficient high-quality internships for students and lecturers, by engaging in dialogue with higher education institutions concerning the careers of the future and associated training requirements, by capitalising on the general transferable skills of lecturers, etc.; research partnerships between companies and universities should also be more widely set up;

16. is convinced that local and regional authorities are in the best position to promote and moderate this dialogue, as they generally have excellent contacts with both higher education institutions and the world of work;

17. believes that the relevance of higher education can also be seen in the extent to which higher education institutions meet typically regional or local needs, thus making a real contribution to local or regional development. In the CoR's view, such deep regional roots are one way in which higher education institutions can adapt their mission and strategic priorities and strive for excellence, and it therefore draws attention to and supports the diversity and distinctiveness of Europe's higher education institutions;

18. calls for ICT solutions to be widely introduced at all European higher education institutions; the development of a common IT platform by higher education institutions and the relevant national, regional and local authorities could lead to an increase in the attainment rate;

2.3 Strengthening quality through mobility and cross-border cooperation

19. agrees that well-thought-out mobility and cross-border cooperation are important to the quality of education and to the personal development – in various ways – of the people who benefit from such opportunities. The CoR notes that, in part thanks to the momentum of the Erasmus programme and further strengthened by the Bologna process, Member States and higher education institutions have made significant progress in this respect. These programmes and this cooperation are a huge asset, as they have given many people a clear and positive image of "Europe";

20. nonetheless notes that a great deal still needs to be done to expand and consolidate opportunities for learning mobility and cross-border cooperation, and thus to increase the added value of such opportunities significantly. The European Commission quite rightly lists a number of obstacles at different policy levels, many of which are embedded in a specific national context. The CoR feels that this complexity should not prevent Member States, local and regional authorities and higher education institutions, each within their own area of competence, from addressing these problems without delay;

21. urges the introduction of the Diploma Supplements at all Higher Education institutions as they represent a very important step towards comparability of diplomas and make the recognition of diplomas much easier;

22. draws attention to a number of existing initiatives for cross-border quality assurance in higher education and, in view of their structural impact on the higher education systems of the Member States and regions concerned, would put them forward as models for cross-border cooperation;

23. calls on the relevant national authorities, which are in many cases regional or local authorities, to make the recognition of academic qualifications easier and faster in order to reduce a significant burden to mobility for students and academics; this procedure should not entail any unreasonable costs for applicants and should last no longer than four months;

2.4 *Making the knowledge triangle work*

24. fully acknowledges the need to further develop and make better use of the "knowledge triangle" between education, research and business, and completely agrees with the European Commission's assessment that higher education institutions and research institutes can drive economic development in the territories where they are located, harness regional strengths on a global scale and act as the centre of a knowledge network serving the local economy and society;

25. recognises that this is particularly true if local and regional authorities act strategically in providing support and deliberately select a number of priority areas based on their region's specific strengths and needs, the formation of knowledge and innovation clusters involving the local and regional authorities, universities and local companies, including start up businesses, should be strongly encouraged;

26. notes that the Commission's communication focuses closely on business, the potential for marketable products and services, as well as the knowledge market; stresses that higher education institutions and research institutes also have a social

duty towards – public bodies and the non-profit sector, such as (compulsory) schooling, the medical and paramedical sector, and social and welfare services;

2.5 *Improving governance and funding*

27. shares the European Commission's view that total investment in higher education in Europe is too low, and acknowledges that both Member States and, in many cases, regional governments must take responsibility for increasing public investment in higher education. The CoR therefore urges Member States and, where relevant, regional governments, despite the budgetary pressures they are facing, not to mortgage the future but to set investment on a long-term growth trend, rather than making cuts in sectors that are the foundation of tomorrow's growth. The CoR thinks that the European Commission can take practical action in this respect by using the European Semester to ensure that cuts do not affect those sectors that are crucial to implementing the Europe 2020 strategy;

28. sees education as a public good, and therefore agrees with the European Commission that public investment is, and absolutely must remain, the primary basis for sustainable higher education;

29. endorses efforts to diversify funding, for example using public-private partnerships for the financing of infrastructure, but points out that tapping one of the possible alternative sources – i.e. increasing the share of private funding by raising tuition fees – may increase pressure on households. The CoR is afraid that this pressure on households could lead for example to lower participation, to undesirable shifts in the social make-up of the student population and to the creation or exacerbation of imbalances in mobility flows between Member States or regions. With a view to encouraging equal opportunities for all and the pursuit of excellence, the CoR calls for improved study grant and loan policies based on income and academic performance;

30. agrees with the development of new funding mechanisms, or further honing of existing ones, that are performance-related, support a variety of strategic choices and diversity in the profiles of institutions and promote excellence in all forms. At the same time, experience has shown that such mechanisms must be introduced carefully and cautiously, not least to ensure that the methods and indicators used really do further the desired objectives and take full account of the sought-after diversity between and within institutions;

31. points out that greater autonomy does not release higher education institutions from their accountability or responsibility towards their local area. Nonetheless, the CoR acknowledges that increasing institutions' autonomy does often have a positive impact in terms of attracting private capital, thus contributing to the desired increase in higher education investment;

3. The EU contribution: incentives for transparency, diversification, mobility and cooperation

32. welcomes the European Commission's intention to play a more active role in supporting higher education institutions and the various national, regional and local authorities in implementing the agenda for the modernisation of higher education. The CoR sees this support – in all its forms – as vital in ensuring the necessary convergence between the agendas of the various governments and higher education institutions while allowing for the desired degree of diversity and profiling;

33. urges the European Commission to pay even closer attention, when drafting specific programmes and lines of action, to one of the priorities that it has itself set for Member States and higher education institutions: increasing participation and boosting the "social dimension" of higher education to that end;

3.1 *Supporting reform through policy evidence, analysis and transparency*

34. notes that it has been shown, for example in implementing the Bologna process, that the use of relatively simple comparative scoreboards to monitor the status of a reform agenda can be very effective in providing information and generating interest, and recommends that greater use be made of such tools. The CoR notes in this context that scoreboards at Member-State level often cannot show the different dynamics at work within various regions, and therefore cannot do justice to the policies pursued at local and regional level, particularly in fields that are primarily or solely local or regional competences;

35. supports the European Commission's U-Map project, which aims to improve understanding of the different profiles of higher education institutions, and U-Multirank, which is a performance-based, multi-dimensional ranking and information tool. Care should be taken to ensure that this does not entail any disproportionate extra red tape for higher education institutions. It seems self-evident that the strength of regional roots and involvement in the local environment is one of the dimensions on which higher education institutions should be classified and ranked;

36. welcomes the European Commission's intention to work with Eurostat to improve data on higher education learning mobility and employment outcomes, and points out that such data is not just of interest to students and graduates in higher education, but can also help school pupils in choosing what and where to study;

37. urges the European Commission to consider carefully what exactly its objectives are in establishing a European

Tertiary Education Register and whether they can be achieved through other existing initiatives, before starting to develop an instrument of this kind;

3.2 *Promoting mobility*

38. fully endorses the emphasis on promoting mobility and refers the European Commission to the comments that it made in the "Mobility initiatives" section of its opinion of 27 and 28 January 2011 on the *Youth on the Move flagship initiative* ⁽¹⁾, which are still absolutely valid;

39. is also convinced that focusing on improving knowledge of languages will not only increase the potential for exchanges but also improve their quality, believes that the European Commission could play a supportive role in that regard, and recalls the objective of the European multilingualism policy that every European should have knowledge of two languages other than his mother tongue;

40. supports the European Commission in its desire to improve students' access to masters degrees in other Member States, regardless of their social background, and emphasises the need to provide this category of students with more financial support. The CoR also takes note of the European Commission's proposal to work with the European Investment Bank to develop a student loan guarantee facility at European level. Neither of these steps must result in access to mobility becoming an economic good. The development of such a facility should be additional to existing grant schemes such as "Erasmus", which have long since proved their worth ⁽²⁾;

41. regrets that the lack of mobility of national loans constitutes a barrier to student mobility; insists on the obligation to award loans and grants without any discrimination on grounds of nationality;

42. acknowledges that some mobility flows can present a challenge to certain countries and, occasionally to a greater extent, to certain regions. For subjects, such as medicine, that give the right to perform particular services, the CoR is in favour of permitting such access conditions as are necessary, taking the regional level into account, to ensure the availability of medical care in the region. The CoR is also willing to contribute to a fine-grained analysis of this issue and to help to find permanent solutions that suit all parties concerned and that maintain the European *acquis*;

43. nonetheless believes that specific measures must be taken to ensure equal access to mobility for students in the interest of their studies, irrespective of their socio-economic situation or the geographical location of the region they come from;

⁽¹⁾ CdR 292/2010 fin.

⁽²⁾ Cf. point 20 of the Committee of the Regions' opinion on the "Youth on the Move" flagship initiative (CdR 292/2010 fin), adopted at the Committee's 88th plenary session on 27 and 28 January 2011.

44. also acknowledges that there are concerns regarding the quality of certain kinds of education offered under franchise agreements of a cross-border nature, and urges all Member States to take the necessary action, for example in terms of quality control of the education provided by their own higher education institutions beyond their own borders, so that all Member States can continue to have complete trust in each other's institutions;

45. agrees that there are still too many barriers to cross-border mobility for researchers, and urges Member States to be pro-active in improving rules on fringe benefits and social entitlements, so as to give researchers greater certainty on these aspects of a post abroad and thus make them less reluctant to take part in cross-border mobility;

3.3 *Putting higher education at the centre of innovation, job creation and employability*

46. looks forward to the adoption of the Strategic Innovation Agenda, and hopes that rapid progress can be made on setting priorities for the development of the EIT and on launching new KICs;

47. is interested to see the development of "knowledge alliances" between universities and businesses, but wonders whether it might also be useful – or even necessary – to develop similar alliances between universities and non-profit bodies and organisations. The CoR is thinking here, for example, of the challenges facing Europe in relation to an ageing population, the decline in the number of young people, multiculturalism and climate change;

48. welcomes the European Commission's intention to develop a quality framework for traineeships and is convinced that the Commission and Member States' authorities from national, regional or local level must then focus on actively monitoring the implementation of that framework; the proposed setting up of a centralised platform for traineeship offers in Europe can be an excellent means for providing easy access to traineeship offers and for inciting young people to apply for traineeships in other Member States;

3.4 *Supporting the internationalisation of European higher education*

49. agrees with the European Commission that internationalisation and cross-border cooperation cannot remain limited to within the European Union, and that there is a whole world of opportunities outside the EU's borders. The CoR would point in particular here to the huge potential for cooperation between neighbouring regions inside and outside the EU. In this regard, the EU should promote cooperation between European universities and centres of higher education in third countries, with the aim, inter alia, of strengthening their governance and educational programmes using the experience gained by our centres. Mobility and exchange programmes involving students and teachers from universities in border regions and in the neighbouring third countries should therefore be encouraged, as support for the export of best practices;

50. looks forward to seeing more specific proposals on how the European Commission intends to support the establishment and development of internationalisation strategies by Europe's higher education institutions, and trusts that the Commission will hold discussions with all stakeholders on this. The CoR stresses that local and regional authorities must also be involved in such discussions, as there is often a close interplay between higher education institutions' internationalisation strategies and the development strategies of the region where they are located;

3.5 *Strengthening the long-term impact and complementarity of EU funding*

51. welcomes the proposal to increase funding for current education, training and youth programmes and simplify their administration from 2014 as part of the Erasmus for All programme, and hopes that this new programme will not only broaden the various opportunities for exchange and cooperation, but also reinforce their quality;

52. is equally enthusiastic about the European Commission's proposal to bring the EU's current research and innovation programmes together under the new Horizon 2020 framework programme;

53. offers the European Commission the support of regional and local authorities – in view of their close links with higher education institutions – in encouraging such institutions to make the most of the opportunities provided by Erasmus for All and Horizon 2020;

54. points out, as it has in previous opinions, that this integration of existing programmes into new programmes must be done carefully to ensure that valuable elements of the existing programmes are not lost during the reorganisation;

55. welcomes the link that the European Commission makes between (higher) education, on the one hand, and EU cohesion policy, the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund, on the other. In order to ensure that these funds are used as effectively and efficiently as possible by recipients, the CoR calls for the European Commission to be pro-active in finding and disseminating examples of best practice in the Member States and regions;

3.6 *Next steps towards smart, sustainable and inclusive European higher education*

56. trusts that the European Commission will maintain its much appreciated dialogue with all stakeholders, including local and regional authorities, when establishing specific programmes and lines of action;

57. takes note of the proposal to set up a high-level group to analyse key topics for the modernisation of higher education and trusts that when it sets up this group the European Commission will take adequate account of the specific challenges it mentions in the communication; requests that the CoR be represented at this high-level group;

58. urges the European Commission to pay attention, when framing the modernisation agenda, to the need for synergies between all the flagship initiatives that are relevant to the agenda, and also to take account of the opinions that the CoR has issued on those flagship initiatives.

Brussels, 16 February 2012.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Mercedes BRESSO
