

EUROPEAN UNION



Committee of the Regions

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OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

on

UNIVERSITY-BUSINESS DIALOGUE

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- reaffirms that at the current time, when the EU is seeking to minimise the impact of the current economic downturn and set the course for renewed growth, it is important, given the crucial importance of education and training systems to the Lisbon Strategy and the renewed Social Agenda, to provide a platform for dialogue between significant stakeholders in both education and the economy.
- highlights the importance of university-business dialogue at all levels of governance as an important tool to fully use the potential for regional economic and social development.
- stresses that throughout the European Union local and regional levels have key responsibilities for education and training policy, and reiterates that local and regional authorities are key players in developing regional research and innovation strategies, often managing research institutions and supporting innovative environments.
- underlines the need to focus on the role of higher education in local and regional development and the promotion of cooperation between higher education institutions and local and regional authorities, with the involvement also of local and regional economic and social players.

Rapporteur

Mohammad Masood (UK/EPP), Member of Bradford City Council

Reference documents

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A new partnership for the modernisation of universities: the EU Forum for University Business Dialogue
COM(2009) 158 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. acknowledges the wealth of ideas, often closely connected to initiatives at the local and regional level, and the quality of the reflection generated in the framework of the university-business dialogue so far;
2. highlights the importance of university-business dialogue at all levels of governance as an important tool to fully use the potential for regional economic and social development;
3. recognises the importance of the Knowledge Triangle, consisting of interaction between research, education and innovation, as means of increasing innovation capacity and improving employability of graduates in Europe;
4. recognises the transition from technology transfer through knowledge exchange to knowledge sharing and open innovation systems and that more research is required into the social processes and behaviours that underpin these emerging systems;
5. stresses that throughout the European Union local and regional levels have key responsibilities for education and training policy;
6. reiterates that local and regional authorities are key players in developing regional research and innovation strategies, often managing research institutions and supporting innovative environments;
7. stresses that policy development and programme implementation should utilise existing local democratically elected bodies. Using local knowledge and democratic accountability will improve the governance mechanisms for partnerships between university, business and local government. This will enable local prioritisation and accountability linked directly to the principle of subsidiarity;
8. notes that local and regional authorities are therefore among the main stakeholders in policies and initiatives to deepen and more importantly widen the European Research Area, in particular its vision of strong research and academic institutions embedded in innovative environments;
9. welcomes the fact that in the past decade many universities in Europe have formally incorporated regional economic development into their mission statements. Regional development agencies are also including policies which support partnerships between universities and industry in regional economic strategies;

10. points out that the modes of policy interaction are critically important at the regional level and often need vertical coordination between the administrative levels (European, national, regional) and horizontal coordination between the regions to avoid duplication and to learn from each other;
11. stresses the need to align new and proposed initiatives and programmes, such as the European Research Area (ERA), the European Institute of Technology (EIT) and the Lifelong Learning Programme, to support university-business dialogue;
12. recognises that university-business collaborations are also affected by specific regional conditions; the capacity for development agencies to support university-business collaboration at a regional level; the role of business clusters in developing university-business networks; the level of business investment in R&D in the region;

General remarks

13. underlines the need to focus on the role of higher education in local and regional development and the promotion of cooperation between higher education institutions and local and regional authorities, with the involvement also of local and regional economic and social players;
14. supports the cooperation between universities and the private sector and the need for universities to be seen as drivers of innovation in their regions;
15. encourages universities to explore new avenues of cooperation between public institutions and the private sector, for example through joint public and private innovation funds measures as are in their power to improve mobility in all areas;
16. supports close pan-European cooperation between businesses, universities and research institutes, involving political actors and administrations at local, regional and national level;
17. considers that the level of cooperation remains unequal across countries, universities and academic disciplines despite EU programmes seeking to build partnerships between the two domains of universities and business, usually focusing on partnerships in specific areas such as research or student mobility;
18. believes that the extent to which such cooperation has influenced governance or organisational cultures in the two sectors concerned is limited as few universities have an institution-wide strategy for cooperation with enterprise, with those that do being concentrated in a small number of Member States;
19. is concerned that in many countries the legal and financial framework still fails to reward or may even inhibit the efforts of universities to cooperate with business;

20. recommends that there should be appropriate performance measurement indicators to assess the current level of university-business dialogue. Any performance measurement needs to include both qualitative and quantitative indicators and due consideration will need to be given to how the selection of these indicators could influence the behaviour of user groups;
21. encourages universities to reward university-business dialogue. A particular challenge within the academic community is recognising this engagement in promotion criteria. Whilst many universities state they recognise the importance of university-business dialogue few have clear and transparent ways of comparing it with research and teaching activities and rewarding it appropriately;
22. acknowledges entrepreneurship and the upgrading of competences through lifelong learning as important tasks of higher education;
23. welcomes that in the funding of research and innovation, efforts are being made in various regions to facilitate more private involvement by giving universities and colleges greater autonomy;
24. suggests that new avenues of cooperation between public institutions and the private sector, for example through joint public and private innovation funds, could be trailblazing examples of sustainable use and safeguarding of public money;
25. agrees that cohesion policy plays a special role in supporting innovation activity in the regions; therefore the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) can also be used for funding business incubators and science parks (infrastructure and connections). Clusters are particularly useful for SMEs, as they provide a context which encourages links with universities and large businesses, and enables them to access international trade networks;
26. recognises that SMEs also play a vital role particularly in job creation and innovation and encourages SME participation in university-business dialogue, and the development of innovative and well targeted initiatives to support this;
27. supports the cross-border cooperation of colleges and research institutes with non-university partners in industry and commerce, government, culture and other sections of society;
28. also considers that organisations and other operators that play an intermediary role between universities and businesses can be a vital element in bridge-building between the two and should thus be given greater prominence and more effective support;

Examples of good practice

29. notes and welcomes the many examples of university and business cooperation that exist throughout Europe;

30. is concerned that the availability of examples of good practice from the new Member States is poor;
31. welcomes the intention of the Commission to launch a study to establish an inventory on existing best practices and asks the Commission to take into account the needs of local and regional authorities in this inventory;

Tools at hand for regional and local authorities

32. encourages the establishing of partnership structures of key stakeholders from local and regional authorities, business, the community and higher education to provide a focus for dialogue, e.g. by organising round tables and workshops, establishing science parks for technology transfer, organising science culture events or student fairs;
33. supports mobilising resources of higher education institutions in the preparation and implementation of regional and urban strategies for economic, social, cultural and environmental development;
34. urges higher education institutions to invest jointly in programmes which bring specific benefit to regional businesses and the community while at the same time promoting the funding of foundation professorships by enterprises which encourage networking between different centres of knowledge and R&D and innovation, promote forums for exchanging knowledge, and boost the creation of networks of regions which excel in innovation;
35. recommends that resources for regional engagement are used on a sustainable, multi-annual basis by higher education institutions;
36. expresses its willingness to ensure the coordinated use of FP7, Structural Funds, CIP and EARDF, as this is essential for EU competitiveness and synergies between cohesion, research, higher education and innovation policies at national and regional level, as stated in previous CoR opinions;
37. advocates a wide-ranging interpretation of the concept of innovation, covering social and human sciences and their fertile interplay with the urban and regional cultures or their localities;

Conclusion

38. reaffirms that at the current time, when the EU is seeking to minimise the impact of the current economic downturn and set the course for renewed growth, it is important, given the crucial importance of education and training systems to the Lisbon Strategy and the renewed

Social Agenda, to provide a platform for dialogue between significant stakeholders in both education and the economy;

39. welcomes the Commission's initiative to explore how Structural Funds could be used to support regional initiatives in this regard;
40. acknowledges the potential of cooperation between business and other fields of education – notably secondary schools and VET institutions – and the opportunities provided by European programmes to foster their cooperation;
41. reiterates the need for stronger involvement of relevant public representatives, including local and regional authorities, in the next phase of the EU Forum for University-Business Dialogue;
42. considers it appropriate to keep the focus of the EU Forum for University-Business Dialogue on the cooperation in the field of higher education;
43. calls on local and regional authorities to support cooperation between business and universities and to see universities as drivers of innovation in the regions;
44. urges a continuance of the EU Forum for University-Business Dialogue with plenary meetings, thematic seminars, a web space, and a stronger involvement of relevant public representatives, including regional authorities, and possibly actors from beyond the EU;
45. recommends that an effective response to the New Skills for New Jobs agenda and the economic downturn is proposed, and that partnerships for regional development, partnerships with SMEs, diversification of approaches to learning, quality assurance and accreditation are discussed;

46. advocates that the Commission will seek to explore ways to support new forms of structured partnership between business and universities via relevant EU programmes.

Brussels, 4 December 2009

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

Luc Van den Brande

The Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Gerhard Stahl

II. PROCEDURE

Title	A new partnership for the modernisation of universities: the EU Forum for University-Business Dialogue
Reference(s)	COM(2009) 158 final
Legal basis	Articles 149 and 150 TEC
Procedural basis	
Date of Council referral/Date of Commission letter	02 April 2009
Date of Bureau/President's decision	-
Commission responsible	Commission for Culture, Education and Research (EDUC)
Rapporteur	Mohammad MASOOD (UK/PPE)
Analysis	08 June 2009
Discussed in commission	17 September 2009
Date adopted by commission	17 September 2009
Result of the vote in commission	Adopted unanimously
Date adopted in plenary	4 December 2009
Previous Committee opinions	<p>Opinion on A strategic European framework for international science and technology cooperation, CdR 11/2009 fin¹.</p> <p>Opinion on Clusters and cluster policy, CdR 70/2008 fin².</p> <p>Opinion on More efficient support for research and innovation in EU Regions, CdR 263/2007 fin³.</p> <p>Opinion on The European Research Area – New Perspectives, CdR 83/2007 fin⁴.</p> <p>Outlook opinion on The role of universities in local and regional development within the context of a Europe of knowledge, CdR 89/2003 fin⁵.</p>

1 OJ C 200, 25.8.2009, p. 5–8.

2 OJ C 257, 9.10.2008, p. 76–82.

3 OJ C 105, 25.4.2008, p. 1.

4 OJ C 305, 15.12.2007, p. 25.

5 OJ C 073, 23.3.2004, p. 22–33.