

Odile Quintin, Director-General for Education and Culture, European Commission

## The changing role of universities in the knowledge triangle

Presidency Conference

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### **1. Introduction**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to open this session on the changing role of universities in the knowledge triangle. I want to thank the Swedish EU Presidency for highlighting this issue. The question of how our universities evolve is not just of interest to the educational world. It has implications for the future evolution of our society and for our ability to build a more sustainable economic growth after the current downturn.

In Europe, and worldwide, we are facing significant social and economic challenges: the financial crisis and job losses; and the challenges of globalisation: demographic, technological and climate change.

This is new territory that needs new solutions. The key is education. On the one hand, better skills all round, to cope with and succeed in a fast-changing world. On the other, a dynamic knowledge triangle where excellent higher education, research and innovation play off each others' strengths.

Today, I want to focus on how universities can bring these goals within reach.

### **2. Universities opening up to society**

Commissioner Figel' outlined the Commission's modernisation agenda for higher education to you yesterday. The bottom line is simple: universities will best reach their potential by becoming more transparent, open and responsive to the needs of the labour market and society.

### *Employability - New Skills for New Jobs and lifelong learning*

Last year, the Commission launched our New Skills for New Jobs initiative. We have hard evidence that the world of work is changing. We need to prepare people for change: to equip them with the lateral, creative skills that, more and more, will be at the nucleus of tomorrow's jobs, the evolving and changing jobs that people will do over their lives.

We must build our capacity to understand where, and what, these jobs will be, in order to provide people with the right skills and knowledge mix. New Skills for New Jobs aims to do this at European level. But we need to go right down to the level of the educational establishment. Universities, individually and as a body, have a responsibility to determine where opportunities will lie and to prepare their students for the new jobs ahead.

Universities also have to take lifelong learning on board. Lifelong learning is a win-win situation for universities. As the numbers of young people coming up from school diminish, universities' natural catchment will shrink. At the same time – and we are already seeing evidence with this recession – working people will want to upskill throughout their working lives, and will look to universities to meet their needs.

To meet these challenges, universities will need more autonomy, to decide their own profile, building on their strengths, and the strengths of the local and regional community.

We hope that the new, multidimensional ranking system we are supporting will reflect all these different nuances of a university's mission, helping individual universities to establish a dynamic identity of their own.

### *Partnerships with business*

Involving business is a crucial part of these reforms. Bringing in business can help universities perform and manage themselves better. It can improve graduates' job chances, by putting new skills on the programme, and by developing new curricula. And it can help universities respond flexibly to non-traditional learners. Not least, business involvement can

help universities broaden their funding base – even more vital as pressure grows on the public purse. And business to has much to gin from linking into the capacities for foresight and strategic thinking within universities.

### *Anchoring higher education in the knowledge triangle*

Universities also have a crucial role in getting the knowledge triangle to work. In tackling Europe's innovation gap, the main question to date has been how to translate scientific knowledge into innovation. We now need more focus on the links between education and innovation, both to help create innovators and to help the wider population be open and accepting of innovation. There is not enough feedback from research and innovation into curricula and educational practice. The relationship may work reasonably well as a continuum from education into research and on to innovation, but it lacks the loop back into education: educators need a better understanding of how innovation processes succeed and why they often fail. We need a truly integrated knowledge triangle, so that investment in any of the components pays off for the others.

We need a culture change here too, in the minds of both academics and business people. If both sectors can open up to each other, the free flow of people, skills and ideas can spark dynamic links at each corner of the knowledge triangle.

### **3. Partnership: the example of three Commission initiatives**

The Commission has been championing more partn erships between business and universities for some time. Let me raise three Commission initiatives that support this culture change.

#### *EIT – the new creative generation*

First, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology. As you know, the EIT proposes new ways to weld the knowledge triangle together, in its Knowledge and Innovation Communities.

The KICs will forge the dynamic links we need between academia and business: promoting multi-disciplinary skills in study programmes, business involvement in curriculum design and entrepreneurship education as a core part of all its masters and doctorate studies.

The KICs will develop new EIT-branded degrees; people from all backgrounds and places will work together in co-location centres on key issues facing society, such as climate change, sustainable energy, or the information and communication society of the future.

This creative, mobile generation of people will be the EIT's role model for transforming the knowledge triangle, hopefully to be emulated by other universities and by other business-academic partnerships.

#### *University – Business Forum*

Second, our University-Business Forum also opens up better cooperation between academia and enterprises. This European platform for dialogue, set up by Commissioner Figel' in 2008, is helping to overcome the barriers and identify practical cooperation and partnerships. It has thrown up many innovative responses that we hope to see multiplied: from student internships and more mobile researchers and professors, to business involvement in curriculum design and universities developing their offer of lifelong learning opportunities for people already in the workforce.

The forum will continue its work and explore how it can extend the partnership approach to other levels of education. I also hope that it will inspire reforms nationally and regionally.

#### *Erasmus financial support for education–business projects*

Third, support from the Erasmus programme for University-Business cooperation. Erasmus is rightly famous for supporting the large scale mobility of students between universities: but the programme is also changing attitudes and practices in academia and business.

Partners from outside academia – businesses, chambers of commerce or regional bodies - are encouraged to get involved: to foster university-business cooperation, help develop more job-oriented curricula, or to help universities develop their students' entrepreneurial abilities. This part of the programme – Erasmus Placements – will, I predict, become more widespread and better known in the years ahead.

## **4. Conclusion**

To finish, I believe that European higher education is in a much stronger position than a decade ago. The Bologna Process to create a European Area of Higher Education is bringing us closer to becoming a pan-European knowledge society - where people acquire higher skills, where knowledge and expertise flow more freely, and where creativity and innovation are valued.

We need all partners to work together. The Commission initiatives I mentioned, and the multitude of initiatives discussed at this conference, are steps in the right direction. I believe that if universities continue down this road of partnership – with business; with local and regional authorities; with other universities at home and across borders – European higher education will become an even stronger force; more open, but consequently more able to steer society in the right direction.

Thank you.