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Subject: Pursuing the modernisation agenda for higher education in Europe
- *Exchange of views*
(Public debate pursuant to Article 8(2) CRP [proposed by the Presidency])

Following consultation of the Education Committee, the Presidency has drawn up the attached discussion paper as the basis for an exchange of views at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council on 30-31 May 2016.

Draft discussion paper
for the exchange of views at the EYCS Council of 30 May 2016 on

Pursuing the Modernisation Agenda for
Higher Education in Europe

1. Introduction

In 2011 the Commission published an *Agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems*¹, in response to which the Council adopted a set of conclusions². While the core topics in this agenda remain relevant, new challenges and opportunities have since emerged³. The European Commission has accordingly announced its intention to review the agenda in order to reflect the current needs of higher education across Europe. A public consultation has taken place, providing valuable input for a renewed European agenda for higher education to be presented this autumn⁴.

Against this background, the Netherlands Presidency is organising an exchange of views in the May EYCS Council to raise awareness on this topic and to **enable Education Ministers to shape this strategic European initiative by bringing to the table issues and considerations they believe should be addressed within the renewed Modernisation Agenda.**

¹ COM (2011) 567 final

² OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, pp. 36 - 41.

³ European Education Ministers expressed their collective ambition to pursue important goals in the context of new societal and economic challenges for higher education. Yerevan Communiqué (14-15 May 2015)

⁴ The **online consultation** received 1485 contributions, 1,005 from individuals (mainly people working in educational institutions and current students or recent graduates) and 480 from representatives of an organisation (mainly higher education institutions - HEIs). Separately, **48 position papers** were received in response to the targeted consultation (30 from government authorities and 18 from national and EU level stakeholder organisations)

2. Key discussion topics and organisation of the debate

The Netherlands Presidency has selected three key topics that it feels reflect the main challenges for European higher education. These are (1) **increasing the labour market relevance of higher education** through skills and university-business partnerships; (2) **preparing engaged citizens** by putting greater emphasis on inclusion and social and civic competences; and (3) **the changing roles of teaching staff**.

In order to focus the discussion, Ministers from three Member States have been invited to present briefly a concrete example of a policy or project linked to one specific discussion topic. The debate will be structured in three successive rounds. After each short presentation, the other Member States will be invited to respond with comments or questions.

Due to time constraints, the Presidency asks Member States to select **one** of the three brief presentations to which they wish to react, using the questions in sections C below as a basis. It would be appreciated if contributions to the debate were as spontaneous and concise as possible (max. 2 minutes).

Presentation 1: Increasing the labour market relevance of higher education

A. Introduction

Building on the recent debates in the EYCS Council on 24 February and the EPSCO Council on 7 March⁵, as well as some work at more technical level⁶, the Netherlands Presidency would like to continue the debate on skills by focusing on European higher education.

⁵ Letter of Minister Bussemaker and Minister Asscher, 4 April 2016

⁶ “Developing future skills in higher education”, ET2020 – Peer Learning Activity (Brussels, 25-26 February 2016); DG meeting Higher Education (Amsterdam, 11-12 April 2016).

European higher education institutions (HEIs) have an important role to play in preparing students for fast and structural changes in the labour market and for the changing nature of many occupations, which increasingly demand high-level skills. Knowledge and technical, professional and sector-specific skills should therefore be combined with transversal, non-cognitive skills, such as creativity, entrepreneurship, problem-solving and the ability to cooperate in multi-disciplinary teams.

HEIs could consider how to better address labour market needs *inter alia* (1) by engaging more actively in partnerships with business and other relevant actors (2) by introducing work-based learning into their curricula and (3) by better connecting different formal and informal learning environments. Furthermore, strengthening connections with the region in which HEIs are located can contribute to a rich learning environment for students as well as to regional innovation and economic development⁷.

Continuously acquiring and updating knowledge and skills has become more important than ever. Sufficient opportunities for lifelong learning need to be available to, *and* utilised by, everyone, including those already in work. This requires HEIs to be more flexible and demand-driven, meeting the needs and demands of an increasing number of working adults. Open and online learning (including MOOCs) offers great potential to increase the options available for adult learners to adapt their studies to their working and private lives, to build up the modules required to obtain a qualification and to contribute effectively to their own up-skilling.

⁷ Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems, COM(2011) 567 final.

B. Outcome of the public consultation

The responses to the public consultation on the future of the EU's modernisation agenda emphasise the growing need for highly qualified people to meet the future needs of the labour market in Europe⁸ and the role of higher education in meeting these needs. Nevertheless, ensuring that higher education is (more) relevant to real-world needs, emerges consistently as a priority. Only a minority of respondents agree that "there is a good match between the supply of higher education graduates and the knowledge and skills the economy needs".

Both the online survey and position papers received show strong agreement on the growing importance of "transversal" or "21st century" skills and trans-disciplinary knowledge to prepare students for a fast-changing labour market. Another recurring theme raised was the need to strengthen skills in the field of ICT (both in terms of specialists and digital literacy more generally).

Among the tools and mechanisms to enhance labour market relevance, respondents most frequently highlighted the importance of:

- improved intelligence on skills needs;
- diversity in higher education systems (different types of programme);
- the need for well-equipped and qualified teachers;
- better cooperation with employers and outside actors;
- more work-based learning⁹;
- international mobility; and
- flexible entry routes.

⁸ Over 70% of respondents to the online survey believed their country (or the EU in general) needed more higher education graduates.

⁹ 60% of respondents to the online survey "agreed strongly" with the statement that those in charge of higher education should "provide more opportunities for students to gain work experience during their studies" (and another 30% agreed to some extent).

C. *Question for debate*

What can governments do to help strengthen the societal relevance of European higher education institutions, and how can European cooperation support and add value to this?

Presentation 2: Preparing engaged citizens

A. *Introduction*

The relevance of higher education extends beyond preparation of students for the labour market. Higher education also has a valuable contribution to make to personal fulfilment and wellbeing (*Bildung*), to the transfer of fundamental values and to developing confident, engaged citizens who contribute to the academic community, as well as to society at large.¹⁰

Particularly in the light of the current influx of large numbers of refugees into Europe, higher education should step up its efforts to contribute to inclusiveness and cohesion. This is about much more than fixing deficiencies in immigrant educational attainment. It should also be about valuing diversity and making good use of this diversity (e.g. ‘the international classrooms’). Recognition of prior learning, including informal learning, is a crucial way of improving access for newly arrived migrants to European higher education.

To contribute to students' broader personal development, European HEIs have an important role in acting as social communities, in which all students feel welcome and find a sense of belonging. In which students learn to form their own opinions, but also to appreciate other people's perspectives, ideas and feelings. This requires *inter alia* intensive and more personalised forms of higher education, involving close contacts with lecturers, plenty of room for discussion and personal feedback, in a way that does full justice to the individual student's background, talents and style of learning.

It is in this way that HEIs in Europe can give something back to society by engaging students in learning beyond the campus and by bringing them into contact with other sections of society, thereby promoting cohesion. Moreover, students can learn a great deal from extra-curricular activities, for example in the form of voluntary work and community engagement programmes.

European HEIs could also make better use of the possibilities of online education, since this gives students an extra possibility (in addition to physical learning mobility) to look beyond the borders of their own disciplines and their own countries and to use the time in the classroom to broaden and deepen dialogues, both amongst students and with tutors.

B. Outcome of the public consultation

Responses to the public consultation stressed a range of channels through which higher education contributes to social inclusion and active citizenship. Some responses placed emphasis on access to and the completion of higher education as a driver of social mobility and inclusion. Widening access to higher education is still seen as important, even though even greater weight was attached by consultation respondents to priorities relating to improving the quality and relevance of teaching and learning¹¹.

Consultation responses frequently emphasised that helping students to engage in the society of which they are part is a key aspect of making higher education "relevant". Equally, a strong overlap emerges between the types of skills and attributes (such critical thinking, communication and intercultural understanding) needed for the labour market (see above) and those needed for active citizenship.

¹¹ Around 40% of respondents to the online survey "agreed strongly" that those in charge of higher education should "do more to widen access to higher education to more groups of society", compared, for example, to over 60% agreeing "strongly" the higher education should "provide more opportunities for students to gain work experience during their studies".

40% of respondents to the online survey disagreed to some extent or strongly with the view that "higher education courses [currently] help prepare students to contribute actively to society". A number of consultation responses included concrete suggestions for fostering active citizenship, in particular through better cooperation between all disciplines of higher education and the social and voluntary sectors, including in curriculum design and delivery.

C. Question for debate

What can governments do to help strengthen the societal relevance of European higher education institutions, and how can European cooperation support and add value to this?

Presentation 3: The changing roles of teaching staff

A. Introduction

Preparing students for life and work in the twenty-first century demands adaptation on the part of every HEI in Europe, but most of all it increases and complicates the task of today's teaching staff. Not only do they transmit knowledge to students, they also play a key role in teaching broad skills and preparing students for an active role in society at large. The quality of teaching staff is therefore one of the most important pre-requisites for excellent European higher education.

European HEIs should continue to work on the continuous professionalisation of teaching staff and skilled education managers, paying special attention to the demand for teaching staff with strong pedagogical and communicative skills. More should be done to structurally promote and reward excellence in teaching, including through paying adequate attention to the different career paths of teaching staff and researchers. This could also be promoted by balancing the link between education and research activities of teaching staff, for example by creating better interaction between research and teaching activities on the ground and by strengthening the links between the European policy frameworks that support these two areas of activity (EHEA and ERA).

Europe should support this, not only by facilitating the sharing of good practices, but also by promoting international teaching staff exchanges, for example through Erasmus+. This contributes to an increased and mutual understanding of other cultures and helps teaching staff to learn from one another.

B. Outcome of the public consultation

Many position papers submitted as part of the public consultation draw attention to the crucial role played by teaching staff in higher education in reforming curricula, deploying new technologies and enhancing learning practices, while also acknowledging that teaching staff requires additional support to fulfil this role effectively. Well over half of respondents to the online survey disagreed with the statement that "teaching staff in higher education institutions receive the training they need to teach well", while over 65% of respondents "agreed strongly" that those in charge of higher education should "improve the training available to teaching staff"¹².

Alongside training, consultation responses also stressed the importance of providing appropriate reward and incentive mechanisms for good teaching (over 70% of respondents to the online survey disagreed with the statement that "good teaching in higher education institutions is rewarded in an adequate way"). International experience was also seen as important: over 80% of respondents to the online survey thought it would be "very useful" if the EU supported "more international mobility for higher education teaching staff", while almost 63% agreed "strongly" higher education in general should "attract more international staff and researchers to institutions".

C. Question for debate

How can governments support the continuous professionalisation of teaching staff and create a better balance between rewarding teaching and research careers? How can European cooperation support and add value to this?

¹² Among the suggested priorities for those in charge of higher education in the online questionnaire, this priority received the highest number of respondents who "agreed strongly".