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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject: Evolving scenarios for the transformation of EU Higher Education
- *Policy debate*

Following the consultation of the Education Committee, the Presidency has prepared the attached background paper, which is submitted as the basis for the policy debate to take place at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 17-18 May 2021.

Evolving scenarios for the transformation of EU Higher Education**Purpose of the discussion**

To what extent are European citizens mobilised to guarantee that knowledge and learning are the core of their aspirations? Are they mobilised in the knowledge that higher education, together with research and innovation, drive policies aiming for a digital and green transition which, in turn, is in need of a more resilient, inclusive and global Europe?

This question will drive the ministerial discussion, which is to be framed by the vision of building the 'European Education Area' by 2025 along with the strengthening of the 'European Research Area' and the 'Higher Education transformation agenda', as well as fostering the sustainable growth of 'European Universities'.

Looking towards the future of higher education institutions in Europe, the 'Council on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)', adopted last February, identified the establishment, by 2025, of an agenda for higher education transformation in Europe as a specific action in higher education; its focus will be on inclusion, innovation, connectivity, the digital and green transitions, and international competitiveness, fundamental academic values and high ethical principles, as well as employment and employability. In addition, significant insights have been published by many institutions and stakeholders, including the European University Association ('Universities without walls – a vision for 2030'). Also, the policy report produced by the European Commission 'Towards a 2030 vision on the future of universities in Europe', of September 2020, considers a forward-looking and future agenda for higher education.

Specific topics to be addressed by ministers

Preserving European diversity of higher education together with promoting a common European vision and values towards a strengthened European identity among youngsters and citizens has become a unique challenge for policy-making in higher education throughout Europe. It requires promoting synergies among regional, national and European instruments and policies. The goal is to guarantee the necessary skills and competences among learners fostering different European and global cultures, in different languages, and across borders, sectors and academic disciplines.

It is in this context that the ‘European Universities’ initiative establishes a diversified set of inclusive pan-European partnerships, based on excellence and inclusion in learning, teaching, research and innovation, covering a broad geographic scope throughout Europe. These partnerships aim to contribute to shared, integrated long-term education, research and innovation strategies, engaging society at large, in order to strengthen the knowledge landscape across European regions; they also boost the quality, attractiveness and societal empowerment of European higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions encompass an increasingly diversified set of supply schemes and increasingly share online and physical resources, courses, expertise, data and infrastructures to leverage their strengths and become more resilient; a few critical emerging challenges should be subject to specific policy action, including the following:

1. Guarantee ‘European Universities’ as ‘test beds’ for student-centred approaches, addressing societal challenges and skills needs in Europe by working in partnership and building European knowledge-creating, transdisciplinary and transnational teams of students and academics (‘challenge-based approach’), together with researchers, businesses, regional actors and civil society actors. In cooperation with their surrounding innovation ecosystems, higher education institutions must be able to prepare students, graduates and early career researchers to avail themselves of the available opportunities and become agents of change for the twin green and digital transformations. This approach should:

- make lifelong learning a reality in higher education; introducing innovative pedagogies and student-centred curricula, jointly delivered across European inter-university campuses, where a diverse student body can build flexible learning paths at all studies and career levels. Micro-credentials can help to complement full degree programmes by widening learning opportunities and making the learning experience more flexible and modular contributing to upskilling and reskilling;
- embed physical, blended and/or virtual mobility in the curricula, in line with the quality standards in Europe and in Member States, and where practical and/or work-based experience is provided by external mentors to foster an entrepreneurial mind-set and developing civic engagement;
- create new and more inclusive learning environments that reach out to disadvantaged and non-traditional learners and contribute to strengthening the social dimension of European higher education systems.

2. In addition, it is essential that ‘European Universities’ are capable of making full use of the EU’s excellent research and innovation capacity in the higher education sector, supporting a new generation of highly skilled and competitive European researchers, and a stronger dimension of research and innovation in Europe. European Universities should:
- act as 'test beds' for responsible research and teaching, including: i) communication about open observation, monitoring and reporting systems about research and teaching careers; ii) improved tenure track systems and strengthened career management and diversification; iii) adoption of open science principles, including the guaranteeing career development by making research publications freely available on journal websites, public repositories, and other open science practices, such as open access publishing, knowledge and data sharing, and open collaboration;
 - fully adopt the 'European Charter for Researchers' and 'Code of Conduct' geared towards fostering European research career development practices applied for multiple career paths;
 - improve recruitment, rewarding and assessment systems of researchers and teachers towards a better appreciation and valuing of research performance beyond purely bibliometric indicators based on journal impact factors, to encourage openness, sharing and collaboration as a means of increasing research quality and impact. Also improve the recruitment, reward and assessment systems towards a better balance between educational, research, managerial and entrepreneurial achievements, thus fostering true European practices for recruitment and career development;

- act as a role model for the transformation of higher education, and as a bridge between the European Education Area and the European Research Area, establishing increasingly stronger partnerships where joint recruitment of academics and researchers becomes the norm and where their careers can develop in harmony.

Specific questions to be addressed by ministers:

1. Do you agree that European Universities' alliances should be 'testbeds' for interoperability and cooperation between Member States regarding European research and teaching career development? How can joint recruitment schemes for teachers and researchers achieve effective 'multidirectional' and 'balanced' brain circulation across Europe?
2. As a Member State, what specific measures are you prepared to take to promote a European approach to quality assurance for joint degrees?
3. Are you considering adopting national legislation allowing for micro-credentials in higher education?
