Modernisation of education in the EU

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PURPOSE: to outline the new EU strategy for higher education.

BACKGROUND: the success of the European project depends on the EUs capacity to build a better future for European citizens. It is also at the heart of the initiative 'Investing in Europe's Youth' and the New Skills Agenda for Europe. These made clear that effective education and training systems are a foundation of fair, open and democratic societies and of sustained growth and employment.

The EU's 'pillar of social rights' and recent reflection paper on harnessing globalisation identify education and skills as a priority for European cooperation.

The role of the Union: the EU has a successful record of supporting higher education through policy cooperation and funding programmes. The European Semester is a key driver of reform, namely through education-related country specific recommendations.

As part of the Europe 2020 strategy and the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), the Council agreed that 40?% of young people should have a tertiary education qualification or equivalent by 2020.

Supporting this target, since 2011, the Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education has provided strategic direction for EU and Member State activities to:

- build evidence about what works in higher education (in education, research, innovation and the design of systems) through studies, expert groups and analysis and monitoring of benchmarks and indicators;
- support cooperation, mutual learning and targeted policy advice between governments and authorities responsible for higher education;
- strengthen the capacity and outputs of higher education institutions by funding innovative cooperation projects between institutions and their partners (Erasmus+, Horizon 2020) and, through European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), investment in infrastructure, facilities, skills and innovation projects;
- support international mobility of students, staff and researchers as a way for them to develop their experience and skills (Erasmus+ and Marie Sk?odowska-Curie Actions);
- strengthen collaboration between higher education, research and business.

Adapting to the changing world: the Commission notes that European higher education systems still face a number of challenges, including:

- a mismatch between the skills Europe needs and those available to it: in the period up to 2025, half of all jobs are projected to require high-level qualifications. Many parts of the EU are experiencing shortages in certain high-skill professions, both in terms of qualifications and the quality of the associated skills. At the same time, too many students graduate with poor basic skills and without the range of transversal skills they need for resilience in a changing world;
- persistent and growing social divisions: people from disadvantaged socio-economic and with a migrant background remain far less likely to enter and complete higher education; academics and graduates are too often perceived as detached from the rest of society; gender segregation by field of study, etc.;
- an innovation gap, the performance of higher education in innovation varies strongly between EU regions;
- the different components of higher education systems do not always work together seamlessly: cooperation with schools, vocational providers and adult learning is often limited.

Without higher education institutions (HEIs) and systems that are effective in education, research and innovation and are connected to their societies, Europe cannot respond to these challenges. Reform of higher education is the responsibility of Member States and part of their efforts to develop world-class education and training. The EU can help Member States with their educational reform efforts.

CONTENT: this Communication sets out the Commission's view of how higher education, while building on existing achievements, should refocus efforts on current and evolving perspectives and challenges.

The new strategy identifies four main priority areas for action and proposes specific measures at EU level to complement the work done by higher education institutions and Member State authorities:

1. Tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development;

2. Building inclusive and connected higher education systems;

3. Ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation;

4. Supporting effective and efficient higher education systems.

Within each of the four main priority areas, the Commission defines the specific measures it will take to help achieve the general objectives, for example:

- start a European initiative to track graduates to improve knowledge at national and EU level on how they progress in their careers or further education;
- launch an up-scaled EU STE(A)M coalition bringing together different education sectors, business and public sector employers to promote the uptake of relevant STE(A)M subjects and modernise STE(A)M and other curricula, including through more multidisciplinary programmes and cooperation between relevant faculties and HEIs;
- encourage the integration of work placements into higher education programmes, and support Erasmus+ student work placements with a particular focus on digital skills;
- develop and roll out a digital readiness model to help HEIs, their staff and students implement digital learning strategies;

- step up strategic support for higher education teachers, doctoral candidates and postdoctoral graduates through Erasmus+ to help them develop pedagogical and curriculum design skills through targeted opportunities for staff mobility for pedagogical training;
- help HEIs in developing and implementing integrated institutional strategies for inclusion, gender equality and study success from admission to graduation, including through cooperation with schools and VET providers;
- promote development and testing of flexible and modular course design;
- support recognition of qualifications held by refugees to facilitate their access to higher education;
- support further development and testing of teaching methods for creativity and innovation in higher education;
- step up EU support for university-business cooperation, making the biannual University Business Forum a focal point for exchange on HEIs and regional development at European level and promoting the establishment of regional and national university-business fora across the EU.
- support cooperation and mutual learning among governments, for example through the proposal to review funding and incentive structures for higher education systems and peer counselling on funding;
- optimise synergies between EU evidence tools by creating a Knowledge Hub on higher education.

As the Commission prepares for the next multiannual EU budget, it will explore with Member States the future of shared EU targets in the fields of education, research and innovation and seek to strengthen cooperation in these fields as a basis for achieving the objectives set out in this Communication.