

# Policy Note

## **Title**

Update on European higher education developments

## **Action**

This Policy Note is for information only.

## **Audience**

Vice Chancellors; Pro-Vice Chancellors; Directors of International; Bologna Experts; International and European Coordinating Group

## **Executive Summary**

This Policy Note provides an update on recent developments in the area of European higher education: the European Commission's internationalisation strategy 'European Higher Education in the World'; recent recommendations on teaching and learning included in a report by the European Union High Level Working Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education; and 'Opening Up Education', a White Paper on digital education and new technologies.

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# Update on recent developments in European higher education

## Section 1: 'European Higher Education in the World'

1. On 25 June 2013 the European Commission published a White Paper entitled '[European Higher Education in the World](#)', which sets out, for the first time, a European-level strategy for the internationalisation of European higher education.
2. The White Paper contains recommendations for Member States and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as well as a summary of the ways in which the European Union (EU) plans to add value in this area in the coming years.
3. The White Paper builds on the EU's [agenda for the modernisation of European higher education](#) and complements the new EU programmes for higher education and research, Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, which will run from 2014 to 2020.

## **Recommendation for Member States and Higher Education Institutions**

4. In light of growing global competition in this area, 'European Higher Education in the World' seeks to encourage a more strategic approach to internationalisation by Member States and HEIs. To this end, the following recommendations are made:
  - In order to successfully **promote the international mobility of students and staff**: Focus internationalisation strategies to include a strong student researcher and staff component, supported by a quality framework including guidance and counselling services;
  - Set up two-way mobility schemes with non-EU countries, embracing a wide variety of subjects and where appropriate targeting fields with skill shortages;
  - Support fair and formal recognition for competences gained abroad for internationally mobile students, researchers and staff, including a better use of transparency and comparability tools and an increased focus on learning outcomes;
  - Adopt, transpose and implement timely the proposed recast Directives merging

2005/71/ec AND 2004/114/EC outcomes.

5. In order to successfully **promote internationalisation at home and digital learning:**

- Capitalise on the international experiences and competences of the staff of HEIs, aiming to develop international curricula for the benefit of both non-mobile and mobile learners;
- Increase the opportunities offered to students, researchers and staff to develop language skills, particularly local language tuition for individuals following courses in English, to maximize the benefits of European linguistic diversity;
- Develop opportunities for international collaboration via online learning and expand the use of ICTs and Open Education Resources for new delivery modes to widen access, internationalise curricula and pave the way for new forms of partnerships.

6. In order to successfully **strengthen strategic cooperation, partnerships and capacity building:**

- Strengthen the capacity of higher education and research to address global challenges by engaging in innovation-orientated international partnerships and alliances;
- Tackle the remaining obstacles for the development and implementation of joint and double degree programmes, both at institutional and national level, and improve provisions for quality assurance and cross-border recognition;
- Provide entrepreneurial and innovative curricula including transferable skills, and create international training opportunities by working together with employers from inside and outside the EU;
- Ensure coherence between internationalisation strategies and EU development cooperation policies by considering the principles of equity and partner country ownership; use students, researchers and staff from non-EU countries as vectors of cooperation with these countries.

## The EU Contribution to the Internationalisation of Higher Education

7. The strategy also sets out how the EU will provide added value in this area, while fully respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions, by **stronger policy support and financial incentives for internationalisation strategies.**
  
8. In order to contribute to internationalisation strategies in the 2014-2020 period through EU funding, the Commission will:
  - Provide increased financial support through the new programme Erasmus+ for mobility to and from non-EU countries, reaching up to 135,000 learners and staff; and allow up to 15,000 non-EU researchers to start or pursue their careers in Europe through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions in Horizon 2020
  
  - Support international HEI consortia to develop Joint Master and Doctoral degrees through Erasmus+ and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions respectively, and provide high-level scholarships for up to 60,000 graduates to take part;
  
  - Support strategic partnerships for cooperation and innovation, including up to 1000 capacity building partnerships between EU and non-EU HEIs.
  
9. The Commission will also seek to increase the attractiveness of European higher education around the world, by improving quality and transparency through:
  - Fostering the comparability of qualifications, credits and recognition systems through international cooperation and dialogue;
  
  - Supporting the development of the U-Multirank transparency tool as an alternative to traditional rankings that mainly focus on research;
  
  - Supporting efforts to increase the global awareness of the high quality and rich cultural and linguistic diversity of European higher education, working with national promotion agencies, financing higher education portals that promote the European educational and scholarship offer; and identifying best practice in the use of alumni networks as an instrument of soft diplomacy.

## Next steps

10. The UK HE International Unit (IU) provided comment on the strategy to the UK Government on behalf of the sector. The strategy was welcomed as a clear statement on behalf of the European Commission on the value of internationalisation for employability and competitiveness, as well as placing an encouraging emphasis on the global dimension of higher education, looking beyond the EHEA to the rest of the world.
11. However, the IU also stressed that the European Commission must demonstrate flexibility in order to accommodate diverse national and institutional contexts and that any efforts to promote the European Higher Education Area must complement rather than duplicate those activities already in train at national level.
12. The 'European Higher Education in the World' strategy was discussed at two Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meetings this autumn and was broadly welcomed by all Member States. Council Conclusions on the global dimension of European higher education are expected to be adopted at the Council meeting on 25/26 November 2013.

## **Section 2: High Level Working Group on the Modernisation of European Higher Education - Recommendation on Teaching and Learning**

13. In September 2012, the European Commission established a new [high level working group on the Modernisation of European Higher Education](#), chaired by former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, in order to advise on the implementation of the [agenda for the modernisation of European higher education](#). In its first year, this group focused on how best to achieve excellence in the arena of teaching and learning.
14. The culmination of this work was a [report](#) published in June 2013. The report makes 16 recommendations to HEIs and public authorities, including a call for the quality of teaching and learning to be placed on an equal footing with the pursuit of excellent research; mandatory certified training for professors and other higher education teaching staff; more focus on improving student employability; and the creation of a European Academy of Teaching and Learning.
15. These recommendations are included at Table 1.

Table 1

**Recommendation 1**

*Public authorities responsible for higher education should ensure the existence of a sustainable, well-funded framework to support higher education institutions' efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.*

**Recommendation 2**

*Every institution should develop and implement a strategy for the support and on-going improvement of the quality of teaching and learning, devoting the necessary level of human and financial resources to the task, and integrating this priority in its overall mission, giving teaching due parity with research.*

**Recommendation 3**

*Higher education institutions should encourage, welcome, and take account of student feed-back which could detect problems in the teaching and learning environment early on and lead to faster, more effective improvements.*

**Recommendation 4**

*All staff teaching in higher education institutions in 2020 should have received certified pedagogical training. Continuous professional education as teachers should become a requirement for teachers in the higher education sector.*

**Recommendation 5**

*Academic staff entrance, progression and promotion decisions should take account of an assessment of teaching competence alongside other factors.*

**Recommendation 6**

*Heads of institutions and institutional leaders should recognise and reward (e.g. through fellowships or awards) higher education teachers who make a significant contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning, whether through their practice, or through their research into teaching and learning.*

**Recommendation 7**

*Curricula should be developed and monitored through dialogue and partnerships among teaching staff, students, graduates and labour market actors, drawing on new methods of teaching and learning, so that students acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability.*

**Recommendation 8**

*Student performance in learning activities should be assessed against clear and agreed learning outcomes, developed in partnership by all faculty members involved in their delivery.*

**Recommendation 9**

*Higher education institutions and national policy-makers in partnership with students should establish counselling, guidance, mentoring and tracking systems to support students into higher education, and on their way to graduation and beyond.*

**Recommendation 10**

*Higher education institutions should introduce and promote cross-, trans- and inter-disciplinary approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, helping students develop their breadth of understanding and entrepreneurial and innovative mindsets.*

**Recommendation 11**

*Higher education institutions – facilitated by public administrations and the EU – should support their teachers so they develop the skills for online and other forms of teaching and learning opened up by the digital era, and should exploit the opportunities presented by technology to improve the quality of teaching and learning.*

**Recommendation 12**

*Higher education institutions should develop and implement holistic internationalisation strategies as an integral part of their overall mission and functions. Increased mobility of students and staff, international dimension of curricula, international experience of faculty, with a sufficient command of English and a second foreign language and intercultural competences, transnational delivery of courses and degrees, and international alliances should become indispensable components of higher education in Europe and beyond.*

**Recommendation 13**

*The European Union should support the implementation of these recommendations, in particular through promoting:*

- *innovative teaching and learning methodologies and pedagogical approaches;*
- *guidance, counselling and coaching methods;*
- *improved programme design, taking account of the latest research on human learning;*
- *the professionalization and development of teachers, trainers and staff;*
- *mobility and exchanges of academic staff for long term teaching assignments;*
- *systematic and regular data collection on issues affecting the quality of teaching and learning.*

**Recommendation 14**

*The European Union should support the establishment of a European Academy for Teaching and Learning led by stakeholders, and inspired by the good practices reflected in this report.*

**Recommendation 15**

*Researchers supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and who are intending a career in academia should be given the opportunity to gain professional teaching qualifications and be supported in teaching activities alongside their research.*

**Recommendation 16**

*Member States, in partnership with the regions, are encouraged to prioritise, in their Partnership Agreements under the Structural Funds, initiatives to support the development of pedagogical skills, the design and implementation programmes relevant to social and labour market needs, and the strengthening of partnerships between higher education, business and the research sector.*

## Next steps

16. Following the publication of this report, the IU made the following points to Government:

- The report places a welcome emphasis on the importance of teaching and learning, an area in which the UK higher education system is well-placed to play a leading role in policy dialogue at European level.
- However, in taking forward these recommendations, the European Commission is urged to take into account the vital importance of university autonomy and the diversity of Europe's higher education systems and institutions.
- For example, recommendations 4 and 5, which stipulate that all staff teaching in higher education institutions by 2020 should have received certified pedagogical training, that continuous professional education should become a requirement for HE teachers, and that academic staff entrance, progression and promotion decisions should take account of an assessment of teaching performance alongside other factors, should not be considered to limit institutional autonomy over human resources decisions.
- Moreover, it is important to recognise and retain the voluntary nature of any assessment or certification within the UK, including but not limited to the HEA's UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) and optional accreditation service. It is considered that student demand and national and institutional frameworks create an enabling environment for improvements in this area, without any requirements being necessary.
- Finally, too expansive an interpretation of the recommendations for EU action (recommendations 13 and 14) would have the potential to amount to competence creep. In particular, a European Academy for Teaching and Learning (recommendation 14) should not seek to take on any assessment or certification within the UK. Further detail regarding what role such a body might take on and how stakeholder leadership would be ensured is necessary before discussions go further.

17. It is not yet clear how the recommendations in this report will be taken forward at European level. The IU will maintain a watching brief on developments in this area.

18. The High Level Working Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education is due to report again, this time on how best to adapt learning in a digital age, in 2014.

### **Section 3: 'Opening Up Education'**

19. On 25 September 2013, the European Commission published '[Opening Up Education](#)', a White Paper which sets out a European agenda for stimulating high quality, innovative ways of teaching and learning, through new technologies and digital content.
20. The White Paper is a joint initiative led by Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, and Neelie Kroes, Commission Vice-President, responsible for the Digital Agenda. The White Paper identifies three priority areas for action:
- Creating opportunities for organisations, teachers and learners to innovate;
  - Increased use of Open Educational Resources (OER), ensuring that educational materials produced with public funding are available to all; and
  - Better ICT infrastructure and connectivity in schools.
21. Under each section, Key Transformative Actions for the European Commission are identified and recommendations are made to Member States and education institutions. A European portal for Open Educational Resources 'Open Education Europa' was also launched to coincide with the publication of the White Paper and can be found at the following address:  
<http://www.openeducationeuropa.eu/>

#### **Next steps**

22. Following the publication of this White Paper, the UK HE International Unit submitted comments to the UK Government ahead of discussions in Council for Education, Youth, Culture and Sport. These comments are summarised below:
- The UK higher education sector welcomes the European Commission Communication 'Opening Up Education' as a timely statement of the strategic importance of digital education. New technologies have the potential to stimulate innovation in teaching and learning, to widen access and participation and to enhance internationalisation.
  - UK higher education institutions have already recognised these opportunities and are at the forefront of digital education in Europe. For example, Edinburgh has successfully launched Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) on the Coursera platform. The Open University is also leading the development of a platform for MOOCs, Futurelearn, in collaboration with

over 20 UK universities, the British Library, the British Council and the British Museum, as well as the University of Auckland, Trinity College Dublin and Monash University.

- In this context, the UK higher education sector is well-placed to contribute to discussions regarding digital education at European level and to advise in more detail on how new technologies impact the higher education sector specifically.
- In general, more differentiation between education sectors (at school, vocational and higher levels) would be helpful in future policy contributions to enable more nuance regarding issues specific to higher education institutions, such as the potential for virtual learning and teaching in collaborative and joint programmes.
- In terms of European Commission activity, the UK higher education sector welcomes the support which is to be provided in this area through Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 as a means of complementing the activity already under way at national level. In particular, research for evidence-based policy is an area where the EU can provide added value by helping Member States and higher education institutions to understand the challenges and opportunities posed by digital innovation in a longer-term, strategic and cross-border context.
- Currently, digital education is at such an early stage of development that it is unclear where European-level activity could be most useful, beyond supporting and disseminating relevant research. In this context, it is important that the European Commission continues to consult stakeholders and remains flexible in its responses to developments.

23. The draft Council conclusions on the global dimension of European higher education note with interest the 'Opening Up Education' and the 'European Higher Education in the World' communications, highlighting the potentially fruitful relationship between digital technologies and internationalisation.

24. The High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education is expected to publish recommendations on the future of digital education in 2014.