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Discussion paper on the topic:

'Towards inclusive, sustainable and competitive 'European universities networks'

This document aims at facilitating a common understanding of what 'European Universities' could be and about the possible next steps for the way forward with a view to nurture discussions during the upcoming 2018 EHEA Ministerial conference. It ends with proposals for topics to be addressed during the dedicated round table in Paris next May, and with questions to the BFUG in Sofia (5-6/02/2018).

Outline of the discussion paper:

I-Context

II-What about 'European Universities / concept proposal and way forward

III-How to make it happen? / Discussion on key issues for topics of the roundtable in the EHEA Ministerial Conference next May

IV-Questions for the BFUG

I/ Context:

At EU level, in December 2017 the European Council has called for taking work forward with a view to encouraging the setting up of 'European Universities', based on bottom-up networks of higher education institutions across Europe which would enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European higher education institutions.

Within the Bologna process and since Yerevan in particular, there have been several developments that would set a favourable framework for such an initiative, in particular the European approach for quality assurance of joint programmes. At the Tartu BFUG meeting, the proposal for a round table 'Towards European universities' during the EHEA Ministerial conference was approved by all delegations. This initiative could be taken forward in close synergy with works carried out by Bologna working groups (WG), such as on increasing the teaching and research nexus (WG2¹).

II/ What about 'European universities' ?- Concept proposal and way forward

"European universities" should enhance the triple role of universities at European level: 1) elaboration of knowledge through research, 2) transmission of knowledge through education, and 3) benefits for the entire society through knowledge transfer, enterprise and innovation. They will contribute to step up mobility and exchanges, enhancing the learning of languages and promoting cooperation of Member States on a voluntary basis and in a spirit of mutual trust.

The aim is to strengthen the global performance, quality and competitiveness of the EU higher education by encouraging the emergence of some 20 European universities by 2024, which should consist of bottom-up networks of higher education institutions across the EU, ensuring a widespread geographical balance and openness, and allowing more interaction between teaching, learning and research (WG3²). Building on synergies between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, each network, located in at least three different countries, should be fully inclusive, sustainable and competitive, and should contribute to make the knowledge triangle a reality.

¹ Refer to the appendix

² Refer to the appendix

They will contribute to shape the next generation of creative and innovative European citizens and help establish a true European mind-set. These European universities networks should foster seamless cooperation across borders and encourage training in different languages. They will also increase exchanges between research teams, thus generating global benefits for European economy and citizens.

This will strengthen up staff and student mobility, build a common higher education culture, contribute to implement agreed key commitments within the Bologna Process and enable HEIs to meet challenges such as: international attractiveness and competitiveness, digital transformation, links with innovation ecosystems, etc.

Building on the various cooperation models that exist between higher education institutions across the EU and past years achievements (including Erasmus Mundus masters), the aim would be to identify a set of common guiding principles and criteria, based on which the European universities networks will commit to reach progressively a more ambitious level of cooperation and integration built on a long-term vision and joint programmes. There should be no one-size-fits-all models, but rather flexibility allowing for different forms of networks and a staged approach, fully respecting national specificities. These networks would namely aim at:

- allowing their students, staff and researchers to move freely;
- allowing all their students to benefit from a European experience across the EHEA – physically or virtually - during their studies, learn different languages and obtain joint European degrees;
- acting as drivers of educational and research innovation by making best use of innovative pedagogical instruments and digital technologies and by ensuring that the latest research results are transferred to education programs;
- building competitive networks of research teams, with common strategies for knowledge transfer to the European economy;
- creating European-scale innovation ecosystems, which can attract students, researchers, businesses and investment, helping to instill innovation and create the knowledge sectors of the future.

III/ How to make it happen? - Discussion on key issues to be addressed during the 2018 EHEA Ministerial Conference

The 2018 EHEA Ministerial Conference in Paris will have a roundtable dedicated to the topic of 'European universities'. It could address the following key issues:

- **seek political consensus** on the concept of European universities and stress the necessary support to be provided to it;
- **launch the proposed approach** above;
- seek commitment to **support enabling conditions**;
- investigate ways to **simplify further quality assurance procedures** for the integrated curricula and joint degrees to be designed within European universities, on the basis of the Bologna Process shared references about quality assurance, for HEIs and quality assurance agencies (EQAR register, ESGs adopted in 2015, as well as the European approach for quality assurance of joint programmes ('Yerevan approach'))³.

IV/ Questions for the BFUG in Sofia (February 5th-6th 2018):

1/ What are your recommendations in building 'European Universities networks'?

2/ What could be the role of the Bologna process in this perspective and for the future of EHEA?

... /

³ The future European integrated curricula and joint degrees will need to be approved along the agreed-on Bologna tools for quality assurance and according to the best practices developed along these lines across the EHEA by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European consortium for accreditation (ECA).

APPENDIX

(1) WG2 report / Recommendations:

'We recommend that the next working plan should include a cross-border concerted joint effort/action programme involving all higher education stakeholders and actors to address the key challenges regarding the implementation of the agreed goals and to realise them in practice. We advise to focus and concentrate our efforts during the following working periods on one basket/group of interrelated topics/issues. (...)We recommend that the countries intensify their cross-border cooperative efforts and make the necessary resources available in order to carry out such a program (...) [which] should be ready to start in June 2018 right after the Paris Ministerial conference.' (page 15)

'The governments should provide the framework conditions stimulating the HEIs to develop joint study programmes and, in particular, removing obstacles in order to allow the use of the European Approach for joint programmes. Governments and other stakeholders should join their efforts in order to promote the use of the European approach.'(page 20)

'We call on the academic communities to elaborate further on the development, the mutual understanding and practical use of learning outcomes approach in a cross border perspective, in particular in designing curricula in order to foster a culture of mutual (normative-cognitive) trust and confidence among HEIs and academics.' (page 26)

'Recalling the 2015 Yerevan recommendations, staff mobility must be further enhanced – especially by the establishment of supportive environments and structures and intensified funding opportunities in order to raise the number of mobilities. All types of staff should be involved in mobility and mobility then as to be recognised, e.g. in staff development.' (page 29)

'That all countries take the necessary steps to complete the implementation of the EHEA mobility strategy by 2020 and in particular to further enhance the quality and quantity of student mobility, for example by widening the usage of mobility windows embedded in the curricula and if necessary, to consider initiating legislative modifications in order to create a favourable environment for mobility windows. (...)To remove any remaining obstacle to a full recognition of the credits gained abroad.' (page 31)

Quotations from:

https://media.ehea.info/file/20171109-10-Tartu/14/2/BFUG_EE_RU_56_4_5aFinalReport_840142.pdf

(2) WG3 / General recommendations:

'2.2. Teaching, learning and research are the key catalysers in the development of critical and creative thought. We encourage HEIs to ensure that synergies between teaching, learning and research should be considered in a more systematic way.' (page 1)

'3.1. We, the Ministers, call on HEIs to connect open science, open educational resources and innovation by digital technologies in the EHEA virtual campuses.'

3.2. Higher education is built on three pillars, namely education, research and innovation which form its fundamentals regardless of the shape of the institution or means of delivery: physical or virtual.

Connecting open science, open educational resources and innovation virtually opens up education for the creation of new learning experiences meeting the demands of the students.

3.3. We call on HEIs to create more flexible learning paths for lifelong learning, greater education and research collaborations and virtual mobility modules.' (page 2)

Quotations from:

https://media.ehea.info/file/20171109-10-Tartu/43/1/BFUG_EE_RU_56_4_2bDraftRecommendations_838431.pdf