



Coimbra Group Statement

Open Consultation on the Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education

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Executive Board

Chair: Prof. Dorothy Kelly (Granada)

dkelly@ugr.es

Prof. Jürgen Barkhoff (Dublin)

jbrkhoff@tcd.ie

Prof. Johnny Laursen (Aarhus)

jl@au.dk

Prof. Henri Luchian (Iași)

hluchian@info.uaic.ro

Prof. Alessandro Martin (Padova)

alessandro.martin@unipd.it

Prof. Joaquim Ramos de
Carvalho (Coimbra)

vr.joaquim.carvalho@uc.pt

Prof. Ludovic Thilly (Poitiers)

ludovic.thilly@univ-poitiers.fr

Office

Egmontstraat 11, rue d'Egmont
BE-1000 Brussels

Director: Ms Inge Knudsen

Knudsen@coimbra-group.eu

Ms Anna Quici

Quici@coimbra-group.eu

Ms Catarina Moleiro

Moleiro@coimbra-group.eu

Ms Cristina Tanase

Tanase@coimbra-group.eu

Tel + 32 2 513 83 32

Fax + 32 2 513 64 11

<http://www.coimbra-group.eu>

The Executive Board of the Coimbra Group welcomes the consultation on the review of the European Union's Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education at a critical time for the European Union in general with serious questioning of some of its basic tenets and values. It is also timely in advance of the mid-term review of both major education and research programmes, Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020. In this brief document the Coimbra Group responds to the major issues addressed in line with previous positions adopted by the Group. This paper complements the responses made to the consultation by member institutions on an individual basis, or through their Rectors' Conferences and other networks and associations, and reflects the nature of the Coimbra Group as a network of 38 comprehensive research-driven universities in 23 European countries, most but not all of which are members of the EU.

This paper will essentially address the three proposed priorities put forward by the European Commission.

1. Promoting relevant teaching and learning

The key term regarding this priority is "relevance", which is a term often interpreted in a reductionist fashion. It is all too easy for relevance to be understood in the narrow light of immediate and short term labour market opportunities; teaching and, particularly, learning in higher education should rather be understood in terms of acquiring knowledge, competences, aptitudes and attitudes which will serve graduates to become autonomous, adaptable independent learners capable of identifying and addressing their own learning needs throughout their adult lives in an increasingly complex global society. Employers systematically stress the need for strong generic competences, often over and above the strictly disciplinary- or sector-based requirements which are traditionally identified. We believe thus that relevance should not be understood in terms of limiting curricula to narrow and rapidly evolving vocational skills; priority should rather be given to helping universities to develop their students' abilities in essential disciplinary knowledge together with generic and transferable competences through actions to fund joint curricular design and staff development for both academics and other professionals working at our institutions (student services, careers guidance and so on).

The EU should encourage and assist universities to develop innovative (including but not limited to digital) learning spaces where these competences can be developed in all disciplines, and staff given the support and training needed to ensure implementation. Large scale dissemination and exchange of best practices already in existence through different channels (portals, publications, conferences and seminars, etc.) should also be encouraged.

One key example of innovative learning space which offers the added value of promoting links with employers is of course work-based learning and its integration into the curriculum. The Erasmus+ programme offers funding opportunities for students taking up work placements in other programme countries, thus combining work with international and intercultural experience.

It is to be hoped that this will be extended in the near future to partner countries. There is, however, still progress to be made in general in the full integration of this kind of learning experience into the curriculum, not only in terms of formal recognition in credits, but also in terms of definition of learning outcomes, and tutorial support and follow-up for students from both universities and employers.

It is also worth noting that in promoting “relevant” teaching and learning, the third corner of the triangle, assessment, is often neglected; attention should be paid to the development of innovative assessment methods and instruments which allow effective and appropriate evaluation of learning in general, but especially of acquisition of generic or transferable skills. This is further linked to the need to enhance current practice in the recognition of prior learning, particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to the current refugee crisis (see below).

The Report on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe’s Higher Education institutions by the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education contains useful recommendations on teaching and learning in general which could form the basis for specific actions to be taken by the European Commission and EU Member States.

Relevance in today’s society must also necessarily refer to the increasingly multicultural and multilingual environments which conform today’s and tomorrow’s Europe. The current crisis of the European ideal, as exemplified critically by negative and xenophobic reactions to the influx of refugees from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan and other regions, to the constant arrival of migrants from an impoverished South, or to the tensions in the multicultural communities of our current urban landscapes, must lead to profound reflection on the role of education in addressing, analysing and engaging with threats to our basic values. Higher education has a key role to play in defending these values, and in the promotion of active and critical citizenship. Excessively pragmatic interpretations of relevance, over-emphasising immediately applicable knowledge and skills, can easily limit or even endanger our young people’s engagement with these values. Universities have a leading role to play in the defence of our values as part of our mission to educate our young people. Internationalization policies which include both physical mobility and the promotion of intercultural learning spaces are one key way in which universities can foment this, and should be maintained and strengthened both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Closely linked are issues of inclusiveness, where actions to ensure access and participation of all sectors of society should continue to be central to policy, particularly in the light of cutbacks in public funding for both institutions and students over recent years.

A further action to promote the relevance of teaching and learning to our contemporary society is the need for the promotion of multilingual policies at universities. It is unquestionable that successive versions of the Erasmus programme have been successful in promoting multilingualism amongst mobile students, but much remains to be done for those not participating actively in mobility programmes, especially in those countries whose national languages are at the same time major world languages. Similarly, more needs to be done to encourage the learning of non-European languages, often undertaken by departments considered as minority or “rare” disciplines and thus under threat, if we are to promote strong intercultural awareness and understanding. In the short to medium term special emphasis should be given to building up stronger linguistic competences as well as deeper understanding and knowledge of key regions such as the Near Middle East and East Asia.

Another obvious aspect of relevance is the use of ICT tools in all university activities, but particularly in teaching and learning. Again, the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education made insightful recommendations in its Report on New Modes of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, as does the Opening Up Education initiative. The European Commission should continue to promote joint development and sharing of on-line learning resources and sound integration of digital tools and resources of all kinds into new teaching and learning spaces and paradigms. Worth underlining on this topic is that not only should ICT tools be an integral part of modes of teaching and learning, but a critical understanding of them and the impact of their use on contemporary society constitutes an essential component of the generic critical and analytical competences to be acquired by graduates.

2. Helping universities to become strong regional innovators.

Universities have traditionally been central to the development of the cities and regions in which they are based, and drivers of innovation at local level. As research hubs, they attract and provide highly

qualified personnel, and inspiring and creative environments which generate new knowledge. One of the shared characteristics of the Coimbra Group's members is that they all have a strong economic and social impact on their cities and surrounding regions; in fact, the theme of the network's annual conference this year is "The University in the City (June 7th-10th, Poitiers, France: www.univ-poitiers.fr/international/coimbra-group-annual-conference-2016/). It will bring together rectors and other senior management of universities with the mayors of their respective cities to debate on this issue and propose actions to enhance cooperation and take advantage of synergies. Similarly, a conference at the University of Pavia in September 2015 brought together university rectors and civic authorities to discuss "The University and the City", resulting in a joint agreement between the Italian Rectors' Conference and the Italian Association of Municipalities (Associazione Nazionale dei Comuni d'Italia) underlining the importance of universities in cities and the interplay between city and university. Continuing to promote intensive and action-oriented dialogue between universities and local actors (city halls, regional authorities, socio-economic stakeholders, ...) is of the essence in order to achieve impactful results.

The European Commission should offer opportunities to strengthen inter-sectoral cooperation, both in learning and teaching and in research, not only in large-scale projects such as Knowledge Alliances under Erasmus+, but also with smaller-scale actions to promote mobility for students and academics to industry, and for professionals from industry to undergo periods at universities with both teaching and research roles. Although of interest at all levels, these links are particularly pertinent at doctoral level.

Of some concern to us is the concept of institutional specialisation according to regional strengths. Universities have not always participated as actively as would be desirable in the design and development of RIS3 strategies around Europe, and there is a risk of such approaches limiting the potential of higher education in fields which are not (currently) regional strengths and limiting the opportunities to strengthen research and learning in areas not yet on "the agenda", but of future potential. As comprehensive universities, in particular, we are concerned that reductionist readings of the concept of specialisation could lead to a loss of breadth of offer by universities and impose severe limitations on interdisciplinarity and future growth. See for example, the recent closure of Humanities departments and faculties at Japanese universities.

We are strongly in favour of the promotion of interdisciplinary approaches to both teaching and learning and to research. This is a necessity if the major challenges facing humanity (grand societal challenges) are to be addressed appropriately and effectively. We believe that interdisciplinary teams allow for greater creativity and innovation. Attempts to promote interdisciplinarity under Horizon 2020 seem, however, not to have been as successful as was initially hoped, and it is often the case that interdisciplinary proposals both in teaching and learning and research are penalized by evaluation systems which have evolved on the basis of disciplinary criteria. An important element in support of modernisation should be the support for changes at the structural level of institutions to enable and reward interdisciplinarity, for example through the incentivization of pilot projects or support for innovative structures such as Institutes of Advanced Studies.

In pursuit of a stronger role for universities as regional innovators, the European Commission could further work to promote the exchange of best practice and joint competence development in the governance of universities, and particularly in the development of specific highly specialised areas of management (research support, patent applications, career guidance, communication, internationalization, staff development, quality assurance, ...).

3. Ensuring education and research functions are mutually reinforcing.

As a group of research-driven universities, we strongly believe that it is the combination of education and research which makes universities unique environments for learning, for generating knowledge, and for promoting creativity and innovation. Submersion in research activity for students at all levels is one way of ensuring that university education is relevant to society through the furtherance of knowledge in all fields.

Yet, in many contexts, the two activities which academics combine in their work are seen as distinct and separate. Staff appraisal systems in many contexts tend to undervalue teaching, particularly for promotion purposes. This can lead to difficulties to ensure that top researchers are directly involved in teaching. A concerted effort is thus needed to conceptualise the academic's profession as a two-sided coin, where both facets are essential and inseparable. Similarly, further effort is required to ensure not only that research feeds into teaching through its outputs, but that all students have sufficient

exposure to active research environments to foster a research mind-set right from the undergraduate cycle. The importance of this for creative and innovative graduates that will ensure that Europe remains at the forefront of innovative knowledge creation and translation can hardly be overstated, and so we believe that early fostering of interest in research is important as part of recruitment strategies for projects and PhD programmes, and that such initiatives should be adequately funded.

The Coimbra Group of Universities would also like to encourage the European Commission to work for a stronger integration of activities between the EHEA and the ERA. Many European comprehensive research universities are engaged in important research collaborations in the context of Horizon 2020, albeit without any coordination or integration with the potential impact of the research activities for the educational programmes and for the competences of graduates trained by the same researchers. There remains a great potential in a better alignment of the European instruments to further advanced research and the programmes to develop and support education and mobility.

The cycle which best illustrates the interaction of education and research continues to be the doctoral cycle, where great progress has been made through the application of the Salzburg and Innovative Doctoral Training principles. These should continue to be promoted, including their application as quality criteria in Horizon 2020 submissions dedicating resources to doctoral education. But much further support needs to be available to incorporate the research mind-set into other cycles of higher education and in particular at undergraduate level, as mentioned above.

Similarly, complementarity of offer at different universities, both nationally and internationally, should be capitalized on by promoting joint programmes especially at postgraduate (Master and doctoral) level. Current funding (under MSCA and Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters in Erasmus+) is limited, thus also limiting the impact of these initiatives; further progress could be achieved by offering seals of quality with lower levels of funding for a larger number of programmes, rather than the generous funding of a very small number as is the currently the case. To further promote programmes of this kind, the European Commission should also continue to support initiatives (especially by quality assurance agencies) working on the simplification of accreditation processes, with a view to avoiding double evaluation and accreditation.

Founded in 1985 and formally constituted by Charter in 1987, the Coimbra Group is an association of long-established European multidisciplinary universities of high international standard. The Coimbra Group is committed to creating special academic and cultural ties in order to promote, for the benefit of its members, internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society. It is also the purpose of the Group to influence European educational policy and to develop best practice through mutual exchange of experience.

Brussels, 8 April 2016