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European University Association (EUA) Annual Conference: Developing talent depends on investment in universities and university autonomy

Around 450 university leaders and other higher education stakeholders gathered last week (13-15 April) at Aarhus University, Denmark for the EUA Annual Conference on the theme “Investing today in talent for tomorrow”.

Europe’s future as a dynamic competitive global region will depend largely on its ability to increase the number of highly trained people within EU Member States and to attract others from abroad. The meeting in Aarhus highlighted that developing and nurturing more talented individuals is already central to the mission of European universities. One of the most striking developments in recent years in this respect has been the rapid development of doctoral (PhD) education within universities. The establishment of structured doctoral programmes and schools has rapidly become the norm in Europe. Other recent changes have also included improved university-industry partnerships and rapid internationalisation of universities.

At the same time, universities face a number of challenges in developing talent - not least because of increasing global competition to attract and retain the best researchers and students. At a time when the EU is preparing priorities and budgets for the next financial period (2014-2020) the conference examined the elements that condition successful strategies for developing talent and will determine universities contribution to the EU2020 agenda for ‘Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth’.

Participants discussed different ways of embedding research from the undergraduate level onwards and underlined how engaging undergraduate students in research improves their overall educational experience and increases interest in pursuing research careers. They also analysed different ways of creating greater critical mass which makes it easier for universities to develop better career opportunities and structures for young researchers.

As employers, universities themselves also play a crucial role in developing talent. University leaders agreed, for example, that they will need to: improve support to young researchers in writing their first grant proposal, or through transversal skills development; provide clear recruitment and exit procedures; and do more to retain staff through a set of institutional benefits such as supplementary pension schemes, support for international mobility and competitive wages. They will also need to put in place the additional human resource (HR) management needed to support international recruitment. University rectors/presidents/vice-chancellors will also have to focus on mentoring and grooming the next generation of university leaders.

In his concluding speech, EUA President Professor Jean-Marc Rapp addressed some of the framework conditions required to help universities develop and nurture talent: “Europe’s universities are working hard to provide innovative research and training environments to help tackle global challenges. EUA has underlined that universities need a balanced and appropriate combination of instruments and funding at the European, national and regional level to assist their efforts.” He also underlined that universities need space to manage and develop their diverse missions. “Micro-management or over-regulation, both of which we can still see in our systems, are the enemies of innovation and efficiency while increased autonomy enables universities to exploit their potential to the full and to improve performance. Autonomous universities are also better able to attract additional funds. We are concerned that the present budget cuts will see a return to greater micro-management.”

Professor Rapp reminded President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, who attended and spoke at the conference, of the importance of increasing public investment in higher education and research. “Two years ago you told us that investing more in education and research will help Europe emerge from recession faster and in better shape. This message is more relevant than ever today”, he said, highlighting the cuts which have taken place in many European countries.

In his keynote speech, President Barroso, underlined that Europe had to value talent and use high-level education and skills to master the challenges ahead. At a time of fiscal consolidation across the EU, he advocated “smart fiscal consolidation – singling out education, research and innovation as growth friendly expenditure”. To mark EUA's 10th Anniversary celebration in Aarhus, President Barroso also underlined the key role EUA has played in European higher education. “Your voice in shaping reforms and your drive in seeing them through will be invaluable for the next ten years,” he added.

Based on the outcomes of this meeting EUA will develop in the coming weeks an Aarhus Declaration that will focus on the key role of universities in developing talent.

Ends.

A copy of Professor Rapp's speech is available on request.

A copy of President Barroso's speech is available here:

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/11/277&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

The European University Association, as the representative organisation of both the European universities and the national rectors' conferences, is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA's mission is to promote the development of a coherent system of European higher education and research.

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