IV

(Notices)

NOTICES FROM EUROPEAN UNION INSTITUTIONS, BODIES, OFFICES AND AGENCIES

COUNCIL

Council conclusions on a renewed EU agenda for higher education

(2017/C 429/04)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

RECALLING the political background to this issue as set out in Annex to these conclusions.

RECOGNISING THAT:

1. at individual level, higher education contributes to the personal and professional development of learners, and helps individuals take responsibility for their lifelong learning and career. At societal level, it lays the foundation for sustainable development, economic growth, innovation and social cohesion and has an important role in identifying and addressing societal challenges.

2. there is a need to strengthen collaboration and synergies, both within education sectors and between higher education and research, innovation and the world of work.

3. higher education institutions need support in fulfilling their civic engagement role and in taking steps to ensure that the composition of their student and staff body provides a better reflection of the population as a whole.

4. higher education institutions should be encouraged to rethink approaches to learning and teaching and to promote, in particular, a student-centred approach, collaborative and inquiry-based learning, inclusive learning environments, and use of digital technologies.

5. while progress has been remarkable in moving towards the Europe 2020 headline target for at least 40 % of 30-34 year olds to have completed tertiary or equivalent education by 2020, it is critical to ensure that higher education is of high quality and relevance to enable graduates to thrive both personally and professionally.

6. in this context, efforts are still needed to provide better quality data on higher education, for example on social and employment outcomes and civic participation for people leaving higher education, as well as on transnational mobility and its challenges.

7. international cooperation and learning mobility in the field of higher education, especially through the Erasmus+ programme, have enabled the creation of new cross-border partnerships, the exchange of good practices, building intercultural understanding and shared values, and unlocking and harnessing new knowledge, with a view to enhancing Europe's higher education system's world-wide attractiveness and competitiveness.

8. specific challenges for Europe's higher education sector are:

    a) equipping students with better knowledge, skills and competences, while addressing skills mismatches and skills shortages in certain occupational fields;

    b) developing equal access and conditions to succeed for all in higher education, and promoting civic engagement by higher education institutions;

c) fully using the untapped potential of higher education institutions to contribute, through teaching and research, to innovation and development in the wider economy, particularly in their regions;

d) encouraging coherence in higher education governance and sustainable resource management.

WELCOMES:

9. the Commission's communication on a renewed EU agenda for higher education ([1]), which builds on previous cooperation and aims to ensure that the EU's tools and programmes support mutual learning and policy cooperation in higher education.

In full respect of the principles of academic freedom, and institutional autonomy of higher education institutions, and recognising their fundamental role in the further modernisation of higher education systems,

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES to focus on the following priority fields for action:

A. PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

10. Encouraging higher education institutions to develop the talent and potential of all learners, and better equip them with the knowledge, skills and competences they need to act as active and responsible citizens in society and to participate in the labour market and in life-long learning.

11. Tackling skills mismatches and skills shortages as well as anticipating future skills needs by encouraging higher education institutions to:

a) strengthen cooperation with employers, for example through work-based learning and by incorporating theoretical and practical components into programmes;

b) collaborate with educational institutions at all levels and other relevant stakeholders to motivate learners to pursue careers in high-skilled professions, including in academia, that do not only respond to the labour market demands of today but also contribute to shaping tomorrows´ economy, society and the future of work, and to place special focus on acquiring skills in the fields of science, technology, engineering, (arts) and maths (STE(A)M);

c) use skills and labour market forecasts and analyses as input to improve the quality of higher education and to help learners make informed study choices;

12. Building stronger links with local communities, for example by better involving community and voluntary activities into programmes, where appropriate, and by encouraging an entrepreneurial culture and skills both inside and outside the higher education institutions.

13. Encouraging higher education institutions to implement innovative approaches to teaching and learning, in particular by developing a strategic approach to digitalisation and by enhancing the digital literacy of all learners.

B. ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY AND SUPPORTING ACADEMIC STAFF

14. Striving for more equity by enhancing access to higher education using a wide array of means, including working towards better accessibility at regional level, as well as creating better conditions to succeed and ensuring high quality education and guidance for all students, regardless of their background.

15. Making efforts to open up higher education systems for people at any stage of their life, by facilitating the transitions between different qualification levels and educational pathways, improving the recognition of informal and non-formal learning, and by developing more flexible modes of delivery of higher education, for example through blended learning and Open Educational Resources.

16. Encouraging higher education institutions to support and incentivise initial training and the continuous professional development of academic staff, in order to equip them with the appropriate teaching skills required to address the needs of a diverse student body, create effective collaborative learning environments, engage students in research activities, promote interdisciplinarity and better utilise innovative pedagogical practices.

([1]) 9843/17

17. Taking steps to improve the digital competences of academic staff, including digital pedagogy and discipline-specific digital competences.

18. Making efforts to appreciate excellence and innovation in teaching, for example by developing reward systems and career opportunities for academic staff, taking into consideration the balance between teaching and research activities.

19. Promoting learning mobility and other relevant international experience among students and academic staff, such as virtual and blended mobility or internationalisation at home, and building learning and teaching mobility into programmes more systematically.

C. CONTRIBUTING TO INNOVATION IN THE WIDER ECONOMY

20. Supporting higher education institutions in improving their impact on macro-regional strategies, regional economies and innovation capacity as well as contributing to technology transfer and regional smart specialisation policy.

21. Supporting higher education institutions in creating effective collaboration networks between different organisations and across sectors.

22. Encouraging higher education institutions to create favourable conditions for entrepreneurial thinking and creativity and to take a holistic look at how research and innovation are integrated into study programmes.

23. Supporting developments in doctoral programmes to better prepare graduates for careers both outside and within academia, including enhancing the visibility of transferable competences, and helping to release their full potential while contributing to innovation and development in the wider economy and society.

D. PROMOTING EFFICIENCY AND DEVELOPING FURTHER QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

24. Striving for adequate, fair and sustainable funding and for the effective governance of higher education systems in order to improve the quality and relevance of teaching and learning and to promote inclusivity and excellence.

25. Encouraging the active participation of internal and involvement of external stakeholders in the governance of higher education institutions.

26. Further enhancing the efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of quality assurance in order to reinforce mutual trust, strengthen recognition procedures of academic qualifications and stimulate international mobility.

With a view to supporting the Member States' cooperation in the field, WELCOMES THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO:

27. reinforce cooperation under the Erasmus+ programme and strategic framework for education and training including by promoting inclusiveness, excellence and innovation in teaching, fostering the civic and social responsibility of students and higher education institutions, encouraging relevant voluntary and community work and developing collaboration with the business sector.

28. support measures, and foster dissemination of the results, to enhance quality in academic mobility, such as improved transparency of qualifications, including those held by refugees and migrants, and the digital exchange of student data, while fully respecting national and European data protection rules.

29. offer EU-level support to coalitions for the promotion of STE(A)M fields and to share good practices.

30. foster the development of innovative pedagogies to help higher education institutions implement comprehensive digital learning strategies, for example by exploring the Digital Learning Readiness Model.

31. create the incentives and capacity for higher education to seek solutions to social and economic challenges and to make a stronger contribution to innovative and entrepreneurial growth in regions, in particular by facilitating better links with public authorities, research institutions and the business sector.

32. contribute to strengthening the links and coordination between the European Higher Education Area, the European Research Area, initiatives in the innovation area and other relevant international education fora.

33. optimise and create synergies between EU tools for evidence-building as well as strengthen the work of the Eurydice network and the cooperation with the OECD in order to ensure synergies between activities, avoid duplication of effort and benefit from joint work.

34. contribute to the examination of funding and governance structures in the context of cooperation with the OECD, with a particular focus on the balance between teaching and research, with the objective of ensuring improved graduate outcomes and the development of more efficient and effective higher education systems.

INVITES THE COMMISSION TO:

35. take full account of these conclusions in the preparation of its proposals for the future strategic cooperation framework in the field of education and training, the Union programme on education and training after 2020, and other financial instruments, giving due weight to strategic, financial and quality considerations in the development of such proposals.

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ANNEX

Political Background

1. Council conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET2020') (12 May 2009).

2. Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on developing the role of education in a fully-functioning knowledge triangle (26 November 2009).

3. Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education (28 and 29 November 2011).

4. Council conclusions on the social dimension of higher education (16 and 17 May 2013).

5. Council conclusions on the global dimension of European higher education (25 and 26 November 2013).

6. Council conclusions on quality assurance supporting education and training (20 May 2014).

7. Council conclusions on entrepreneurship in education and training (12 December 2014).

8. Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education (Paris, 17 March 2015).

9. 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) — New priorities for European cooperation in education and training (23 and 24 November 2015).

10. Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on promoting socio-economic development and inclusiveness in the EU through education: the contribution of education and training to the European Semester 2016 (24 February 2016).

11. Council conclusions on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training (30 May 2016).

12. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 'A New Skills Agenda for Europe. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness' (10 June 2016).

13. 2016 Education and Training Monitor (November 2016).

14. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on improving and modernising education (7 December 2016).

15. Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on inclusion in diversity to achieve a high quality education for all (17 February 2017).

16. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a renewed EU agenda for higher education (30 May 2017).

17. Council Recommendation on tracking graduates (20 November 2017).

18. Council Conclusions on future of work (7 December 2017).