

Friday 20 April 2012

Modernising Europe's higher education systems

P7_TA(2012)0139

European Parliament resolution of 20 April 2012 on modernising Europe's higher education systems (2011/2294(INI))

(2013/C 258 E/08)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
- having regard to Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union,
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 20 September 2011 entitled 'Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems' (COM(2011)0567) and the accompanying staff working document on recent developments in European high education systems (SEC(2011)1063),
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 29 June 2011 entitled 'A Budget for Europe 2020' (COM(2011)0500),
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 6 October 2010 entitled 'Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative Innovation Union' (COM(2010)0546),
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 15 September 2010 entitled 'Youth on the Move – An initiative to unleash the potential of young people to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the European Union' (COM(2010)0477),
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 3 March 2010 entitled 'Europe 2020 – A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' (COM(2010)2020),
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 10 May 2006 entitled 'Delivering on the Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation' (COM(2006)0208),
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 28 November 2011 on the modernisation of higher education ⁽¹⁾,
- having regard to the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on promoting the learning mobility of young people ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 14 February 2011 on the role of education and training in the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training ⁽⁴⁾,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the internationalisation of higher education ⁽⁵⁾,

⁽¹⁾ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/126375.pdf.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 199, 7.7.2011, p. 1.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 70, 4.3.2011, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 135, 26.5.2010, p. 2.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 135, 26.5.2010, p. 12.

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- having regard to the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') ⁽¹⁾,
 - having regard to the conclusions of the European Council of 17 June 2010, in particular the part entitled 'A new European strategy for jobs and growth' ⁽²⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 26 October 2011 on the agenda for new skills and jobs ⁽³⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 12 May 2011 on 'Youth on the Move: - a framework for improving Europe's education and training systems' ⁽⁴⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 18 May 2010 on 'An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering' ⁽⁵⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 25 October 2011 on mobility and inclusion of people with disabilities and the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 ⁽⁶⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 9 March 2011 on the EU strategy on Roma inclusion ⁽⁷⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 20 May 2010 on university-business dialogue: a new partnership for the modernisation of Europe's universities ⁽⁸⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 23 September 2008 on the Bologna Process and student mobility ⁽⁹⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 13 March 2012 on the contribution of the European institutions to the consolidation and progress of the Bologna process ⁽¹⁰⁾
 - having regard to Rule 48 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education and the opinion of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (A7-0057/2012),
- A. whereas the economic crisis – and its consequences in terms of the imposition of austerity measures and budget cutbacks –, demographic changes, rapid technological change and the resulting demand for new skills pose serious challenges to, and call for far-reaching reforms in, Europe's higher education systems, which must not have a detrimental effect on the quality of education;
- B. whereas, in a knowledge-based society, the future hinges on education, research and innovation;
- C. whereas individuals must be supported in re-thinking their careers and need to widen as well as update their skills and knowledge at an ever faster rate in order to meet the challenges of the labour market, bearing in mind that there is a difference between vocational study programmes, where European harmonisation is feasible and desirable, and humanities courses, where there should continue to be substantial freedom and autonomy in study and research programmes with regard both to the historical and cultural differences among the Member States of the European Union and to the diversity of higher education institutions in terms of teaching and of their specific missions;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.

⁽²⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/council_conclusion_17_june_en.pdf.

⁽³⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2011)0466.

⁽⁴⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2011)0230.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 161 E, 31.5.2011, p. 21.

⁽⁶⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2011)0453.

⁽⁷⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2011)0092.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ C 161 E, 31.5.2011, p. 95.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 8 E, 14.1.2010, p. 18.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2012)0072.

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- D. whereas the Europe 2020 Strategy states that, by 2020, 40 % of 30-34-year-olds in Europe should complete higher education or equivalent studies, given the estimate that 35 % of all jobs in the EU will require such qualifications; notes, however, that in 2010 only 26 % of the workforce in the EU had attained this qualification level;
- E. whereas more than 21 % of young people in the EU are unemployed;
- F. whereas in the EU in 2010, 16,5 % of young people were not in education or the labour market;
- G. whereas in the EU in 2010, unemployment of tertiary education graduates stood at 5,4 % compared with more than 15 % among those with only lower secondary education; whereas, on the other hand, it is taking longer and longer for the majority of those graduates to find secure employment;
- H. whereas over 60 % of university graduates are women, but the majority of senior positions in universities (e.g. postdoctoral positions and professorships) are still held by men;
- I. whereas only 13 % of institutions in the higher education sector are headed by women and only 9 % of universities have a female head of staff, and whereas women therefore have considerably less influence with regard to research decision-making;
- J. whereas 75 of the top 200 universities worldwide are to be found in the EU Member States;
- K. whereas only 200 of Europe's 4 000 higher education institutions rank among the top 500 in the world;
- L. whereas universities have been an important resource in Europe for almost a millennium, whereas the importance of their role in the progress of society should not be reduced to their contribution to the economy, and whereas their development should not depend solely on their ability to adapt to the economic needs of the current economic model;
- M. whereas equal access for all young people to higher education and training should be encouraged;
- N. whereas universities encourage individual autonomy and creativity and play a very important role in the promotion of knowledge, and whereas the Member States should therefore make every effort to ensure that higher education is widely accessible without discrimination, particularly on social, economic, cultural, racial or political grounds;
- O. whereas education, especially higher and tertiary education, is responsible for shaping the attitudes and values that underlie civil society;
- P. whereas the national legislation of the respective Member States considers higher education to be a fundamental tool for determining the future of EU citizens;
- Q. whereas education is the responsibility of the Member States, and whereas it is important to ensure that higher education institutions receive financial support, first and foremost through the provision of adequate public funding;
- R. whereas the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a significant development that could contribute to European integration while respecting the diversity of education in the various EU Member States and the goals of higher education in relation to society;

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- S. whereas the European Union has an important role to play in strengthening this area while drawing on the efforts and cooperation of the Member States in this regard;

The changing role of higher education institutions

1. Calls on higher education institutions to integrate lifelong learning into their curricula, with the help of economic assistance and different study programmes, and to adapt to a student base that includes adults, elderly people, non-traditional learners, full-time students who have to work while studying and people with disabilities, and therefore calls on higher education institutions to implement programmes aimed at removing existing obstacles and barriers;
2. Invites higher education institutions to take into account the needs of professionals who need, as lifelong learners, to update and broaden their skills at regular intervals, including through the organisation and fine-tuning of update courses which are accessible to all social groups, close cooperation with employers and the development of courses which meet the needs of the labour market and which could facilitate a return to education for unemployed workers;
3. Calls on higher education institutions to uphold the spirit of autonomy in teaching and research while providing specific study programmes with the aim of meeting the needs of professionals who wish to update their skills;
4. Reiterates that higher education has the potential to promote social inclusion, social advancement and upward social mobility; calls, with respect for the principle of subsidiarity, on Member States, regional and local governments and higher education institutions to strengthen – inter alia through the development of adequate financial support schemes – their efforts to widen equitable access to studies for all, from early childhood to higher education, irrespective of sex, ethnicity, language, religion, disability or social background, and to fight all forms of discrimination, recognising multiculturalism and multilingualism, including sign languages, as fundamental values of the EU that need to be fostered;
5. Calls on the Member States to pay increased attention to, and to support higher education institutions serving traditional national, ethnic or linguistic minorities, with a special focus on endangered cultures and languages;
6. Invites higher education institutions to encourage student participation in sports;
7. Underlines the complementary role of state, private and religious forms of higher education across Europe;
8. Emphasises the importance of promoting democratic values, while stressing the need to acquire a sound knowledge of European integration and ensuring that Europe's former totalitarian regimes are understood as part of its common history;
9. Also emphasises the need to continue traditional education in an academic spirit and not to permit the education system to be totally subordinated to the labour market, in view of the need to shape ethical and moral values among students at the same time as caring about academic progress;
10. Calls on the Member States and higher education institutions to establish a general framework – covering rules, responsibilities, political and educational objectives and the quality of, and priority given to, training and research – in which to promote best practices and respond to the challenges of the communication society;
11. Emphasises that academic staff and students, as well as their organisations and associations, need to be involved in the modernisation of higher education institutions; stresses that both excellence in research, in the broad sense of the term, and excellence in teaching and scientific achievement need to be rewarded, without thereby penalising those higher education institutions – for example humanities faculties – that do not fit into evaluation and performance criteria linked solely to the skills demanded by the market economy;

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Information about higher education institutions

12. Stresses that the quality and relevance of higher education are a core condition for taking full advantage of Europe's intellectual capital;
13. Proposes the introduction of clear and uniform criteria for the creation of pan-European rankings of higher education institutions, thereby allowing prospective students to make an informed choice of university and providing comprehensive information about the respective universities;
14. Encourages the Commission's initiative to launch, in cooperation with all the institutions, students and other stakeholders involved, a multi-dimensional tool for the differentiated classification and ranking of higher education institutions based on characteristics such as a long tradition of providing higher education in Europe, the quality of teaching, student support (i.e. scholarships, counselling, housing), physical and information accessibility, regional engagement and knowledge transfer; opposes, on the other hand, the establishment of a classification of higher education institutions on the basis of non-homogeneous performance indicators which do not take into account the diversity of educational pathways, programmes and linguistic diversity in European universities;
15. Also emphasises that this tool should not solely involve compiling conventional ranking tables and that specific characteristics of the relevant institutions should be afforded due attention in the results;
16. Suggests that consideration be given to instituting a unified mechanism for the monitoring and evaluation of compliance with academic standards by higher education institutions, both public and private;

Funding higher education systems

17. Stresses that higher education is a public good that fosters culture, diversity, democratic values and personal development and prepares students to become active citizens who will support European cohesion;
18. Insists once again that Member States should reach the target of investing 2 % of GDP in education;
19. Points out that mainly public and also private funding is of primary importance for the modernisation of higher education systems; emphasises that investment in higher education in Europe is crucial to overcoming the current economic crisis; calls on the Member States and higher education institutions to expand scholarship and funding programmes for those institutions and to develop innovative methods of funding mechanisms which can contribute to more efficient functioning of higher education institutions, complement public funding without increasing the pressure on households and make higher education accessible to all; expresses regret at the significant cutbacks to education budgets in several Member States, as well as the constant increase in education fees, which is leading to a significant increase in the number of vulnerable students;
20. Calls for the EU budget for 2014-2020 under the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund to include spending on higher education related to investments in university infrastructure and academic staff;

The transition from higher education to the labour market

21. Calls on higher education institutions to adapt to new challenges by creating new fields of study that reflect the needs of the labour market, taking into account the development of science and technology by maintaining an appropriate balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills;

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22. Calls for the promotion of best practices that help higher education institutions to strengthen teaching and research in all subject areas through the inclusion of students and to provide additional key qualifications for the labour market, in order to facilitate young people's transition from higher education to the labour market;

23. Calls for higher education institutions to be opened up both to offer continuing vocational training and to create appropriate courses for workers who have not attained an upper secondary educational qualification, so as to tap into additional potential to achieve the quota of graduates;

24. Urges the Commission to present its proposal for a quality framework for traineeships, and emphasises the success of the 'Erasmus placements' that give students the opportunity to gain work experience abroad, and insists that this action be continued under the new programme and strengthened by means of suitable funding;

25. Calls on higher education institutions and institutions responsible for the education sector at regional, national and European level to monitor trends in labour market requirements in order to reflect more accurately future needs in terms of learning opportunities;

26. Highlights the need to track graduates' employment outcomes to measure how well higher education responds to labour market demands; welcomes, therefore, the Commission's commitment to improving the availability of such data, with the principal aim of providing students with the necessary information to guide their study choices, while at the same time giving higher education and research institutions the necessary information to identify and, subsequently, develop programmes of study covering both general knowledge and specific professional skills through lifelong learning, in ongoing dialogue with those involved in the production of knowledge but also with society as a whole and with the state;

27. Urges Member States to collect and publish statistical data regarding the correlation between different higher education degrees and employment opportunities;

28. Calls for the development of an international databank, similar to AlmaLaurea, which helps graduates to identify suitable job, training, study and research opportunities, removing economic obstacles through bursaries and student loans in order to ensure real equality among students, and thereby encouraging mobility and the matching of skills and jobs; reiterates the importance of proper communication in ensuring that this information is easily accessible to students, recent graduates, the unemployed, jobseekers and employers;

29. Considers youth guarantee schemes to be a valuable tool facilitating the transition from higher education to jobs, and calls on the Member States to incorporate such schemes into their national transition strategies;

30. Recalls the important role that the structural funds can play in this regard; welcomes the commitment made in the 'Youth Opportunities Initiative' communication (COM(2011)0933) to the full deployment of the resources available, and calls on higher education institutions and local authorities to use this opportunity in order to increase the provision of support and guidance for students entering the labour market;

Gender balance in higher education

31. Notes that there are still gender disparities in European education systems even though almost all countries have now implemented policies to combat them, and that such disparities influence both performance at school and study and career choices, and have a negative effect on economic growth and on the welfare state;

32. Highlights the fact that many female students attending vocational or secondary schools still choose careers which reflect traditional gender roles; notes, therefore, that better vocational guidance is needed in order to combat persistent stereotypes;

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33. Points out that, because their higher education qualifications are not marketable enough, women are more often overqualified and underpaid for their jobs and often end up unemployed or in casual jobs, a situation which further disadvantages them on the labour market at the start of their careers, fuelling the cycle of pay inequality;

34. Recalls that, across the Member States, there are still very few initiatives in place to provide information about gender equality and promote gender equality in education; suggests that teachers should receive specific training on equality between men and women;

35. Points out that the sharing of domestic and family responsibilities between women and men is a sine qua non for the advancement and achievement of equality between women and men; calls on universities and higher education institutions to recognise that women learners may have specific additional responsibilities outside of learning, such as caring for young children or elderly relatives; stresses the need for universities to supply parents – especially women – with a sufficient quantity of high-quality, affordable and accessible childcare, including community centres, so as to facilitate their equal participation in studies and research; also encourages the introduction of a greater variety of study modes, such as part-time and distance learning, and, in this connection, reminds the Member States and the EU institutions to increase the level of financial support for lifelong learning in order to enable women to continue their studies, to re-enter the workforce and to balance their professional and personal responsibilities;

Engaged higher education institutions

36. Encourages higher education institutions to engage more intensively with their regions and establish dynamic collaborative actions with regional governments, local councils, public bodies, non-governmental organisations and small and medium-sized enterprises to enhance regional development; points out that this should also strengthen interaction between higher education institutions and employers;

37. Calls on the Member States and their central and regional authorities to include and support higher education institutions in cross-border cooperation;

38. Encourages the Member States to intensify the interaction between the sides of the knowledge triangle (education, research, innovation) as a key element for growth and job creation;

39. Points out that the development of higher education curricula and research programmes should remain a task for universities, taking into account the needs of the labour market as regards employability;

40. Welcomes the Commission's support for 'Knowledge Alliances' and 'Sector Skills Alliances' in which higher education institutions exchange information with businesses while developing curricula to address skills shortages; calls upon businesses and entrepreneurs, including small and medium-sized enterprises, actively to develop partnerships with higher education institutions by providing high-quality internships for students and lecturers and capitalising on lecturers' general transferable skills; reiterates, however, that higher education institutions produce cultural content which translates not only into vocational skills but also into general knowledge, in terms of intellectual experience of reality and of the common values by which people live;

41. Calls for a commitment to more flexible and innovative learning approaches and to delivery methods which are always centred on students' needs;

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42. Notes the need for cross-border higher education institutions and enterprises to cooperate in practical programmes and in shaping students' future careers by identifying the specific development pathways, expectations and challenges that will await them in the labour market;
43. Emphasises the usefulness of developing mechanisms and management strategies that facilitate the transfer of innovative ideas and research results into society and business and allow society and businesses to provide input to higher education regarding current and expected needs for skills and innovations, taking into account best practices from all over the world; points out that such a connection is likely to favour financially only those research and higher education institutions that specialise in innovation and technology at the expense of education linked purely to the humanities;
44. Reaffirms the value of democratic governance as a fundamental way to ensure academic freedom and promote active participation by all actors in the life of a higher education institution;
45. Emphasises that transparency, equal distribution of rights and obligations between the relevant cooperation partners and higher education institutions, and a balanced principle of representation must be observed in the context of cooperation, so as to ensure that higher education institutions are enabled to organise and develop themselves independently as public amenities in accordance with academic principles;
46. Also emphasises that the principle of democracy and self-governance among higher education institutions and their staff and students should be respected and maintained in all collaborative projects;
47. Demands, therefore, that higher education institutions and their various bodies be required to disclose cooperative agreements with third parties;
48. Emphasises the importance of cooperation between higher education institutions and NGOs and the European voluntary sector, in order to promote active citizenship and involve students in active participation through working for the NGO sector;
49. Underlines the importance of sport in the education process; calls on Member States to support and encourage sport among students and to increase support for grassroots sport programmes;
50. Points out that the extent and intensity of collaboration between higher education institutions and their partners in business and society vary strongly across Member States, institutions and academic disciplines;
51. Stresses that continuous investment in the link between education, culture, research and innovation is necessary; stresses the importance of further supporting and developing the European Institute for Innovation and Technology with its knowledge and innovation communities;
52. Emphasises the importance of culture in higher education and calls for the inclusion of special criteria for the humanities in both innovation and research;
53. Emphasises the need to engage higher education institutions and provide support for student initiatives, as well as assisting in the coordination of such activities among other higher education institutions, enterprises and local authorities from various Member States;

Mutual recognition of qualifications

54. Acknowledges the richness inherent in the wide variety of higher education institutions in Europe; calls on the Member States and these institutions to develop clear, integrated pathways that allow learners to progress from other types of education into higher education and to change between different tracks and types of institutions;

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55. Emphasises, however, the need to maintain the diversity of educational pathways and programmes, teaching methods and university systems in the EU; takes the view that it is consequently necessary to develop a national qualification framework, while at the same time promoting the mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications across all Member States;

56. Urges all EU countries to implement the national qualification frameworks linked to the EHEA Qualifications Framework and to develop, and provide financial support for, mutual recognition;

57. Points out that student mobility, and above all study at other universities under the Erasmus Programme, contributes to the exchange of good practice and thus to the modernisation of higher education; notes, therefore, the need for the home university to recognise qualifications acquired while studying at other universities;

58. Supports the Commission's proposal to improve recognition of study undertaken abroad, by consolidating the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); calls for additional efforts on the part of the EU and its Member States to ensure more effective recognition and greater harmonisation of academic qualifications as well;

Enhancing mobility in the EHEA and beyond

59. Reiterates that higher education is a common European public good and that Member States, regional governments, local authorities and the EU share a common responsibility in developing and strengthening the EHEA, the European Research Area (ERA) and the Bologna Process;

60. Stresses that greater coordination among Member States in the field of higher education – including through strong financial and political support for agreements on common core curricula and well-defined learning outcomes – is a prerequisite for achieving the goals of employability and growth in Europe; calls on the Member States to step up cooperation between their relevant ministries in order to update existing curricula to meet the needs of the labour market;

61. Points out the need for collaboration between the EHEA and the ERA as a means to support university research programmes in both science and the humanities;

62. Demands that the attractiveness of the EHEA and the ERA for students and researchers from all over the world be promoted and that collaboration with non-EU countries in educational matters and issues relating to mobility at staff and student level be strengthened, in particular with the countries which are covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) or which directly border the EU, in order to turn the EHEA into a magnet for training and knowledge that is both macroregional and global, particularly in relation to exchange and professional training programmes;

63. Asks the Commission to propose the creation of Euro-Mediterranean Erasmus and Leonardi da Vinci programmes, aimed at promoting transnational mobility among students from both sides of the Mediterranean;

64. Calls for the opening of mobility, exchange, research and work experience programmes to students from countries affiliated to the Eastern Partnership;

65. Recalls the importance of mobility among both students and teachers and, in this connection, invites the Commission to make progress on the EU Visa Code;

66. Recalls the target whereby 20 % of Europe's graduates should be mobile by 2020, and emphasises the importance of language skills as a prerequisite for increased mobility within the EHEA and employability;

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67. Supports the reinforcement of language and sign language teaching – and of the teaching and development of local and regional languages – within the EHEA as a prerequisite for the development of true European citizenship based on multiculturalism and linguistic pluralism;
68. Emphasises the need for the higher education system in each Member State to provide higher-quality teaching so that increased mobility opportunities for students do not go hand in hand with a worsening of the ‘brain drain’, which is now a genuine social problem in some Member States;
69. Points out that the persistent disparities between western and central-eastern European higher education systems must be addressed through real integration measures, with a view to encouraging and supporting cross-border collaboration between higher education institutions; calls on the Commission, therefore, to develop a strategy and draw up a professional financial action plan for reducing these significant regional disparities;
70. Calls on the Member States, the EU and European higher education systems to evaluate the possibility of promoting, within the study cycle, a compulsory training period at a university in a Member State other than the one to which the student is affiliated;
71. Reiterates the principle that loan schemes cannot substitute the grant systems put in place to support access to education for all students regardless of their social background;
72. Asks the Commission for further clarification of the proposal to create a financial instrument to help students secure funding for a Masters degree outside their home Member State, regardless of their social background and financial situation; demands fair and transparent access to the scheme throughout the Member States;
73. Endorses the Commission’s proposal to increase the EU budget available for education, training, research and youth in the next multiannual financial framework, thereby complementing the action taken by the Member States, given that investment in education, training and research is key to attaining the Europe 2020 targets and achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe;

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74. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.

A competitive digital single market - eGovernment as a spearhead

P7_TA(2012)0140

European Parliament resolution of 20 April 2012 on a competitive digital single market – eGovernment as a spearhead (2011/2178(INI))

(2013/C 258 E/09)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Community acquis in the field of the internal market and the information society,
- having regard to the Commission communication entitled ‘EUROPE 2020 – A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ (COM(2010)2020),