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ACCESS AND MOBILITY

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# ANYTHING NEW IN BRUSSELS?

*Christian Tauch provides an update on the latest developments taking place at the European Commission that will have a direct impact on European international higher education.*

For anyone working in an international office, an admissions office or any other university unit that deals with mobility and internationalisation, Brussels may seem like a far-away place, as far as their daily work is concerned. Sure, there is the Erasmus programme, ECTS and other familiar features, but apart from a new generation of mobility programmes every couple of years, little that originates at the level of the ‘Eurocrats’ seems to have much relevance for those practitioners that account for a large percentage of *Forum* readers. Well, if you share this view, you might want to think twice these days: a lot is going on in Brussels that can have immediate consequences for most European universities.<sup>1</sup>

#### INCREASING LEARNING MOBILITY

The occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Erasmus programme in 2007 triggered reflections within the European Commission on how to further increase learning mobility, not just in higher education but for all young people. With the Green Paper on Learning Mobility in 2009, the Commission started a Europe-wide consultation to identify the main obstacles to mobility. The results fed into ‘Youth on the Move’,<sup>2</sup> one of the seven flagship initiatives of the new Europe 2020 strategy and the one most closely related to higher education.

One by-product of the mobility consultation was a guide to the rights of mobile students.<sup>3</sup> This guide could be very helpful as the legal situation of mobile students is, to a large degree, defined by rulings of the European Court of Justice and these rights are not necessarily known by everyone and every institution.

Another by-product was the Council Recommendation ‘Youth on the Move – promoting the learning mobility of young people’,<sup>4</sup> adopted in June 2011. It focuses on improving the framework conditions for mobility, *eg* in the areas of information and guidance, recognition of credits and qualifications and the portability of student support. In order to monitor progress in implementing the provisions of the Recommendation, the Commission will, together with the Member States, develop a ‘mobility scoreboard’.

#### CHANGES AHEAD

All the European programmes in the area of education and training, such as the LLP, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, *etc*, will come to an end in 2013. In June 2011, the European Commission presented its first proposal for the next multi-annual financial framework (2014-2020)<sup>5</sup> which also contains initial ideas for a new European education and training programme.<sup>6</sup> The Commission proposes a significant increase of over 70% for the new programme, *ie* more than €15 billion for the

implement effective education policies. A detailed proposal for the programme was published on 23 November and is now being discussed with the Member States and the European Parliament. Several Member States, as well as stakeholder organisations, have already voiced concerns that the new structure will make orientation in the programme more difficult for the ‘end users’ because of the intended abolition of the sectoral divisions such as higher education, vocational training, *etc*.

#### MODERNISING EUROPE’S HIGHER EDUCATION

All the activities described so far refer to education and training policies in general, but the Commission has also refocused its higher education strategies: in September 2011 it published the Communication ‘Supporting Growth and Jobs – an Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe’s Higher Education Systems’.<sup>7</sup> In it the Commission proposes measures to boost graduate numbers in line with the Europe 2020 benchmark, so that by 2020, 40% of the 30 to 34 year olds should have a

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### THE COMMISSION PROPOSES MEASURES TO BOOST GRADUATE NUMBERS, IN LINE WITH THE EUROPE 2020 BENCHMARK

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years 2014 to 2020. The new programme will, according to the Commission, no longer be structured according to target groups (Comenius = schools, Erasmus = higher education, *etc*) but rather focus on three main areas of activity: supporting transnational learning mobility; supporting the cooperation between institutions and also with businesses to modernise education; and helping Member States to

tertiary or equivalent qualification. The Communication also suggests ways to improve the quality and relevance of study programmes and ways to maximise the role of higher education in helping the EU economy overcome the current crisis. It is useful to read the Communication carefully, because it gives a foretaste of the focal points of the future education and training programme. Thus it is likely



Photo: Rob Wilson (shutterstock)

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01. Front of the European Commission Building in Brussels  
02. Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland

that the long-term cooperation between universities on a number of subjects in the form of networks will be one of the funding priorities. Another priority might be the setting up of long-term networks between universities and businesses.

In addition to the political framework, the Communication also contains several concrete announcements that will be relevant to many universities, among them, these two:

#### U-MULITRANK

In the last two years, external consultants have designed a user-driven multi-dimensional ranking concept.<sup>8</sup> The Commission's intention was to explore the possibility of having alternative approaches for the transparency of universities to the ones offered by the Shanghai ranking or the Times Higher Education Ranking. The aim is to provide more consideration for study and teaching aspects rather than concentrating on an institution's research and publications. The Commission is now planning to have the concept developed further until 2013, with the long-term aim of having U-Multirank fully operational as of 2014. It will of course be a voluntary tool and each university will be free to take part or stay away, but if the initiative is successful it may well develop a strong pull-effect and each institution may have to decide on how to position itself *vis-à-vis* U-Multirank.

#### ERASMUS MASTER LOAN SCHEME

The Commission is developing a proposal for a student loan guarantee facility to increase the financial support available for mobility at Master's level. The idea is to boost degree mobility by allowing Bachelors to go to another Member State to do a full Master's programme with the help of a loan scheme at low interest rates. The Commission is hoping for several tens of thousands of loans per year, *ie* a substantial number that could shake up the graduate education landscape in Europe. This could allow universities to deliberately internationalise and market their Master's programmes, thereby attracting the best Bachelors from neighbouring countries. Additionally, it could have the effect that universities have to make an extra effort to keep their best Bachelors within their walls for a Master's programme. The Master loan scheme has the potential of injecting a new dynamic into the strategic thinking of European universities on internationalisation.

Talking about mobility, a brand-new study has just seen the light of day: it examines trends on student and teacher mobility within 32 European countries. The study confirms that Europe is becoming more attractive as a study destination: in 2006/7, there were about 1.5 million foreign students enrolled in the Europe 32 area. This represents a global market share of 50.9% (every second foreign student in the world was studying in the Europe 32

area). The full study can be downloaded from the website of the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC).<sup>9</sup>

This is but a brief summary of developments at EU-level. If you are interested in keeping up to date, have a look at the DG EAC website or subscribe to their newsletter.<sup>10</sup> There is more interesting news to come – apart from the Communication on the new education and training programme before the end of 2011, the Commission is working on an internationalisation strategy for higher education to be published some time in 2012. No matter whether you agree with what 'Brussels' is doing in the area of higher education or whether you think 'they' should stay out of it altogether, the smart thing to do is be informed – and prepared!

1. The term 'university' is used in this article to designate all types of higher education institutions.

2. <http://ec.europa.eu/youthonthemove>

3. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/pub/pdf/higher/move\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/pub/pdf/higher/move_en.pdf)

4. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/yom/rec\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/yom/rec_en.pdf)

5. [http://ec.europa.eu/budget/biblio/documents/fin\\_fwkl420/fin\\_fwkl420\\_en.cfm](http://ec.europa.eu/budget/biblio/documents/fin_fwkl420/fin_fwkl420_en.cfm)

6. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news3008\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news3008_en.htm)

7. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc/com0911\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc/com0911_en.pdf)

8. <http://www.u-multirank.eu>

9. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news3101\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news3101_en.htm)

10. [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/enews/subscribe\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/enews/subscribe_en.htm)