

Higher learning, research and innovation in Europe

Conclusions of the Economic and Social Commission
adopted by the Bern Central Council (5 June 2009)

The Economic and Social Commission of the European League for Economic Cooperation, meeting in Brussels on 18 March 2009

- ◇ **taking note** of the progress achieved in the harmonisation of university degrees in Europe and the exchanges of students, teachers and researchers, as well as the redirection of Community research efforts towards common priority actions,
- ◇ but **regretting** that the aim of the "Lisbon strategy" to make the European Union "the most competitive region in the world" by 2010, not least by raising research budgets to 3% of GDP and by supporting technological innovation in enterprises, has so far only been very partially achieved - an outcome which seems to have been accepted with resignation by both national and Community decision makers,
- ◇ and **recognising** that technological innovation, research and higher education must be objects of priority choices with a view to emerging from the current economic crisis,

wishes to present the following observations and proposals for the attention of these decision makers:

- 1.** Reforms of higher learning must be continued, while giving due place to the autonomy of universities and the ongoing evaluation of the performance of both teachers and students. The latter should, in the course of their studies, have more and better contacts with enterprises, and those should facilitate such contacts as much as possible through appropriate means (financing, training periods).
- 2.** Progress as rapid as possible should be made to facilitate the mobility of researchers, teachers and students throughout Europe: a European status for researchers, transferability of social rights, mutual recognition of degrees etc. At least one term of study abroad should be a requirement for all masters degrees.
- 3.** It is essential to tighten the links between fundamental and applied research, financial institutions and business. The approach by "competitiveness clusters", which is achieving commendable results, should be strengthened and supported Community-wide.
- 4.** The FPRDT (Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development) must become still more focused on the support of practical applications in sectors with future potential and provide financial assistance to collaborative projects, not least within the Eureka network.
- 5.** Innovation in enterprises must be encouraged by activating several convergent policies: direct financial support to the best projects, public guarantee for a share of the risks, aid to the recruitment of researchers, encouraging the use of intellectual property rights, spreading the use of ICT (information and communication technologies) in SMEs, etc.

- 6.** The financial and economic crisis, which has further increased risk-aversion by all the players, is significantly reducing the contribution of own funds, which is crucial, to innovative SMEs through risk capital. Additional fiscal measures must be taken to encourage the activities of "business angels", of incubators and seed capital, of risk-capital players and private equity in general.
- 7.** The important recovery plans implemented in China, the US and elsewhere include efforts in areas such as eco-industries, biotechnology, aerospace and knowledge technologies, which Europe should emulate if it wants to progress further.
- 8.** European countries must nevertheless make their own choices of priority research sectors and key technologies, which may differ from those made elsewhere. Certain programmes must firmly aim at long-term results- without forgetting the positive side effects that military research may have, as the examples of the US and China show.
- 9.** It is desirable to progress towards a European organisation for the support of technological innovation, which would require immediate and significant efforts toward better prior coordination of strategies, tools and targets.
