

HIGHER EDUCATION FOR A CHANGING WORLD

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We live in a fast-changing world, and producing more of the same knowledge and skills will not suffice to address the challenges of the future. A generation ago, teachers could expect that what they taught would last their students a lifetime. Today, because of rapid economic and social change, schools have to prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created, technologies that have not yet been invented and problems that we don't yet know will arise. On the eve of a new century, there is an unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education, as well as an increased awareness of its vital importance for sociocultural and economic development, and for building the future, for which the younger generations will need to be equipped with new skills, knowledge and ideals. Higher education includes 'all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent State authorities'.

Everywhere higher education is faced with great challenges and difficulties related to financing, equity of conditions at access into and during the course of studies, improved staff development, skills-based training, enhancement and preservation of quality in teaching, research and services, relevance of programmes, employability of graduates, establishment of efficient co-operation agreements and equitable access to the benefits of international co-operation. At the same time, higher education is being challenged by new opportunities relating to technologies that are improving the ways in which knowledge can be produced, managed, disseminated, accessed and controlled. Equitable access to these technologies should be ensured at all levels of education systems. Education today is much more about ways of thinking which involve creative and critical approaches to problem-solving and decision-making. It is also about ways of working, including communication and collaboration, as well as the tools they require, such as the capacity to recognize and exploit the potential of new technologies, or indeed, to avert their risks. And last but not least, education is about the capacity to live in a multi-faceted world as an active and engaged citizen. These citizens influence what they want to learn and how they want to learn it, and it is this that shapes the role of educators. Today, however, knowledge advances by synthesizing these disparate bits. It demands open-mindedness, making connections between ideas that previously seemed unrelated and becoming familiar with knowledge in other fields.

Different countries have different traditions, and the status of universities and other institutions varies from place to place. For instance, for engineering, do we compare, say, Stanford with a mainstream French university, or with a specialized school such as the Ponts et Chaussées? Are these schools producing to new employment demands? Can French, German or other European universities continue to supply skills to the likes of Siemens or Airbus, or indeed, to emerging European knowledge-based industries? The challenge for Europe is clear. But so is the solution: evidence

shows—consistently, and over time—that countries and continents that invest heavily in education and skills benefit economically and socially from that choice. For every euro invested in attaining high-skilled qualifications, tax payers get even more money back through economic growth. Moreover, this investment provides tangible benefits to all of society – and not just to the individuals who benefit from the greater educational opportunities. In short, if Europe wants to retain its competitive edge at the top of the global value-added chain, the education system must be made more flexible, more effective and more easily accessible to a wider range of people.

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