

28 February 2014**Touchstones for the European elections: the German, French and Polish Rectors' Conferences question the parties on higher education policy**

The elections to the European Parliament on 25 May are of considerable significance to higher education. The European Union now plays a major role in formulating higher education policy, which has far-reaching consequences in the member states.

For example, the European Commission has issued a number of objectives for the European Research Area which it intends to pursue in the future. These include promoting "Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training" and "Mobility of Researchers between Academia and Industry".

The President of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), Professor Horst Hippler, has stated his views: "The targets set by the European Commission sound positive, but standardised solutions for the whole of Europe should not be imposed on universities; otherwise their implementation could cause more harm than benefit. On a European level, some policy representatives seem to regard 'innovative doctoral training' merely as a doctorate with a stronger orientation towards teaching. Collaboration between research and industry is limited to mandatory modules in the doctoral curricula intended to increase students' practical experience. In Germany, our collaboration on joint research projects with industry is much further advanced than that. Generally speaking, we would like to see policy at a European level incorporating not only teaching at universities, but also the important social remit they have in research and innovation."

For this reason, the HRK, together with the French Rectors' Conference (CPU) and the Polish Rectors' Conference (CRASP), has drawn up a number of electoral touchstones on which they question the parties standing in the European elections about their ideas concerning the role of the European Union in shaping research and higher education policy. The HRK sent these questionnaires to the CDU/CSU, SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP, Die Linke and the AfD in Germany.

HRK President Hippler says: "The presidents of the three Rector's Conferences would like these electoral touchstones to ensure that the campaigns in the run-up to the European elections offer more than just empty speeches. We would like to hear clear statements about what we can expect the political parties to do to shape research and higher education policy at a European level." The three Rectors' Conferences are planning to publish a subject-by-subject comparison of the responses from the parties in Germany, France and Poland on their websites at the beginning of April.

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The electoral touchstones on which the parties are being asked to comment:

1) Proportion of the EU budget for research and innovation

In December 2012, the European Parliament called for a budget of 100 billion euros for the Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development. Given the upcoming revision of the medium-term financial framework, are you still committed to the goal of securing a research budget of 100 billion euros to ensure that Europe remains competitive? How do you intend to achieve this goal?

2) Recognise expenditure on education and research as investment

Expenditure on education and research is an investment in the future of Europe. In our opinion, no cuts should be made in this area during the crisis in Europe to reduce the national deficits of the European member states. Do you support the position of the three Rectors' Conferences and recognise that expenditure on research and education is an investment? Should a mandatory minimum quota be introduced for investment in research, education and innovation to supplement the specified upper limit of national debt at 3% of GDP in order to ensure the future competitiveness and sustainability of Europe, even at times of crisis?

3) Role of universities as drivers of innovation

Universities are at the heart of the triangle formed by research, teaching and innovation – but the Commission perceives universities only as education institutions. How could universities – taking into account this role in society – in future be better represented in the political and organisational structures of the Commission?

4) Structure of the European Research Area

The European Council is calling for the "achievement" of the European Research Area (ERA). How do you define the European Research Area and how should the process leading to its achievement proceed after the elections to the European Parliament?

5) Minimum standards of higher education autonomy

Should the universities enjoy a minimum level of autonomy in the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area and what might this minimum level look like?

6) Mobility in the European Higher Education Area and encouraging a spirit of community in Europe

The structures for the European Higher Education Area are in place, but they still need to be refined. What can be done to facilitate even greater mobility of students and graduates within Europe? How can Europe help universities to continue to foster a spirit of community and European citizenship in the younger generation, particularly in times of crisis such as we are currently experiencing?

7) Collaborating on education with non-European countries

The EU has repeatedly emphasised the need to intensify collaboration with universities in third countries. However, the funding provided for this purpose in Erasmus+ is very limited. What should Europe do in future to make European universities more attractive throughout the world (for students, universities and companies) and to further develop collaborative partnerships with non-European countries?