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Looking to the future of European universities: university leaders highlight key elements for sustainability at EUA Annual Conference

University leaders and other higher education representatives from across Europe came together last week (22-23 March) at the European University Association Annual Conference to discuss and identify the most important elements of 'sustainability' for individual universities and for the higher education sector in the future.

Speakers at the conference held at the University of Warwick (UK) acknowledged that while these were challenging times for many universities (in terms of funding cuts for example, but also pressure to teach increasing numbers of students, improve quality of teaching and increase high-end competitive research), there were a number of positive and proactive steps that could be taken to ensure sustainable and successful European universities. Keynote speakers stressed the importance of enhancing international collaboration even in times of increasing competition. Professor Nigel Thrift (Vice-Chancellor, University of Warwick) set the tone on the opening day by highlighting that cooperation was the way forward in difficult times, and called for increased solidarity between universities.

Another key element highlighted by different speakers, including Minister for Universities and Science David Willetts (UK), was the importance of university autonomy to enable universities to respond to these diverse challenges. Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), for example, told the audience that it was important to value autonomy so universities were able to innovate and shape their missions.

University funding was another crucial framework condition that was discussed at length throughout the conference. Public funding, which accounts on average for nearly 75% of universities budgets in Europe (according to a recent EUA study), is being cut in a number of countries and is increasingly being delivered with more 'strings attached'. The conference highlighted that, as a result of these financial pressures, the issue of tuition fees is increasingly being discussed and debated in many countries across Europe. It also highlighted the crucial importance for universities to implement full costing systems to ensure their financial sustainability.

The recently appointed Chief Scientific Adviser to the European Commission, Anne Glover, and other speakers underlined the need for universities to engage with the public acting as a hub within society. She also warned universities of the need to look after their human capital and to communicate the results of their research to the public better.

The EUA Annual Conference also included break-out sessions designed to enable participants to look in more depth at four specific elements of sustainability: funding, collaborative research, campuses, and innovative teaching & learning. These included case studies of good practice and discussions which outlined possible paths of action for universities in each of these areas, but also highlighted that the four areas of sustainability are intrinsically linked to each other.

In the concluding session, which reflected on the conference discussions, speakers also underlined the importance of thinking 'long-term', especially in terms of collaborations within and outside of the higher education sector, and seizing the opportunities provided by the crisis, at a time when emerging economies are investing heavily in higher education. EUA's new President, Helena Nazaré, told the participants that EUA will take the outcomes of the conference forward in its upcoming work.

Presentations from the event will be available on the conference website:

<http://www.eua.be/warwick.aspx>

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- The main sponsors of the 2012 Annual Conference included: Cisco (Gold sponsor), jobs.ac.uk and Ede & Ravenscroft (Silver sponsors).

The European University Association, as the representative organisation of both the European universities and the national rectors' conferences, is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA's mission is to promote the development of a coherent system of European higher education and research.