

European University Association (EUA)

Comments on the European Commission's New Communication on the European Institute of Technology: Further Steps Towards its Creation

The European University Association (EUA) welcomes the open and productive consultations initiated by the European Commission on its proposal to launch the new initiative of a European Institute of Technology. The new Communication of 8 June 2006 indicates that the European Commission is taking account of the reservations about the original proposal expressed by EUA. The EUA position on the February 2006 Communication on EIT had endorsed the overview of the challenges facing Europe to which the EIT initiative was addressed, but had critically questioned the appropriateness of the proposed legal construction of the "knowledge communities" and secondment operational mechanisms which, it was felt, risked bringing about greater fragmentation of Europe's Universities.

EUA comments on the June 2006 Communication are grouped in three categories; firstly, we address those areas where improvements in the revised text have been made in relation to our earlier critical concerns; secondly, we draw attention to key questions on which clarification is required; and thirdly, we provide further input on key aspects of the EIT proposal.

1. Areas of Consent

Universities as "shareholders" in EIT

EUA has placed emphasis that the impression of "building walls" around faculties/departments/laboratories within universities should be avoided as it would work against the EIT goal of creating new dynamic interdisciplinary environments for achieving synergies across education, research and the open innovation process. The new Communication appears now to recognize that universities as a whole should be "shareholders" engaged in the structured dialogue with the EIT Governing Board as partner organizations in making strategic decisions. There should be no ambiguity on this central point. A partnership approach is needed with universities and other host institutions of the EIT Knowledge Communities in the spirit of achieving "win-win" collaborations.

Flexible EIT staffing arrangements

On "Staffing arrangements between the EIT and Knowledge Communities", the new Communication offers greater flexibility in these arrangements and lists several staffing "options" that may apply ranging from direct employment to dual affiliation. Such greater flexibility is welcomed because it should facilitate the necessary integration of EIT knowledge communities within their university environments to ensure that full benefits are received by them as partner organisations for the medium to long term.

2. Questions to be clarified

Firstly, it remains to be further defined what are the relationships between the "European Institute of Technology" and the "Knowledge Communities". Are the "Knowledge Communities" co-owned by the (mother-) EIT and by others, i.e., universities or industry? The EIT is described briefly as a "light, effective and operational entity" with a "legal personality" and the Governing Board at its central core. EIT is further outlined as "an autonomous body with an innovative structural and operational model and a strong European identity" but its strategic activities and relationships with the Knowledge Communities themselves are un-stated. Further specification and consultation on the distinct roles of the EIT, its legal framework, the work and tasks of its Secretariat vis-à-vis the Knowledge Communities will be a crucial requirement.

Secondly, there remains ambiguity over what balance the EIT will have with respect to “operational” or “funding” activities. In Section 2, “Structure and Governance” it is said that “EIT is an institution which selects and funds “Knowledge Communities” – whereas in Section 8 EIT is stated as “a knowledge operator not a funding mechanism”. A requirement for “substantial public funding” is now mentioned but with no indication of its source. Ambiguity over where EU funding from competitive sources will come from, therefore, also persists. An explicit statement that funds will not be diverted from the EU 7th Research Framework Programme (2007-2013) to the EIT initiative would be a welcome development.

Finally, the form of the legal instrument establishing EIT is left unexplained. A lot of faith and trust is left in the hands of the proposed Governing Board. It is stated only that the chosen legal instrument would provide the “broad framework of objectives and operational rules within which the EIT Governing Board should be free to define the detailed organisation and operation”.

In particular, the nature of the legal instrument will be crucial to determine the feasibility of the awarding of degrees from the EIT and/or “Knowledge Communities”. How the EIT legal framework would accommodate and relate to national regulatory, in particular, quality assurance frameworks governing the awarding of university degrees and their differing specifications is a major issue that is left open. The proposed creation of EIT degrees will have to demonstrate that real added-value for graduates would be achieved. The preference should be to award joint degrees, enhancing the reputation of both the EIT and the participating universities, which could serve as a model on how to overcome inconsistent and bureaucratic national regulations that now impede Intra-European joint programs. Such an approach would build upon the achievements, and keep to the spirit of the Bologna Process reforms.

3. Further EUA Input on Key Aspects of the New Communication

Knowledge Communities

Knowledge Communities will need to be able to respond to the open innovation process and rapidly changing research agenda requiring interdisciplinary and non-linear approaches. Knowledge Communities (which should be perhaps more appropriately re-named “Innovation Communities”) should have the flexibility to allow individuals to move to other opportunities within their host institutions, and be open to new entrants bringing other expertise. The optimum lifetime for an EIT Knowledge Community should be 10 years with a mid-term review. The possibility of renewal for a further 5 years could be possible but with specific attention devoted to avoiding the risk of the establishment of a “conservative” structure without sufficient input of new expertise and perspectives particularly from younger professionals.

Governing Board

The proposed establishment of an Identification Committee to consider the profile and criteria for the selection of the membership of the proposed Governing Board, on the model of that established for the ERC, would be an appropriate and proven method to follow. Given the need for a “demand-driven” agenda for the EIT, the Chair of the Identification Committee should be drawn from the industrial and business communities. Members of the Identification Committee should be selected for their demonstrated innovative capacities in their respective careers in different employment sectors.

The Governing Board, once established, should preferably allow an open process for the identification and selection of topics for EIT Knowledge Communities rather than adopt a strictly “top down” choice of topics. This is not to say that the Governing Board should not indicate priorities but they should be in broad topic fields with an emphasis on risk-taking rather than risk-averse approaches.

Governing Board members should be drawn from all three domains of the “Knowledge Triangle” concept underpinning the EIT initiative. Independence of members from EU Member State Governments would be a crucial requirement.



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EIT and ERC

A clear distinction between the role and mission of the ERC and EIT must be established. The ERC should support and stimulate individual and team-based fundamental research. It will be research-driven, with an emphasis on strengthening the “supply-side” by excellent research. The EIT initiative should be innovation-driven (excellence in innovation) and meet the overall demands to innovate industry by fostering productive “partnerships” between industry/business enterprises, universities and research institutions.

The Need for Continuing Dialogue with Partners

The EUA believes that the valuable consultation dialogue initiated with European Stakeholders should continue as an open and transparent process throughout the crucial development stage of the EIT concept.

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