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European University leaders underline the key role of universities during economic downturn

The 500 university leaders who gathered in Prague until this weekend for the 5th EUA Convention of Higher Education Institutions (19-21 March) had a clear message for European governments. They called on them to invest in higher education during the economic and financial crisis and underlined that universities have a key role as a motor for economic recovery by providing the research based education at all levels needed to promote creativity and innovation.

Professor Jean-Marc Rapp, President of the European University Association (EUA), told the audience that European universities were a long term investment in Europe's future. And while there may be a temptation to cut public spending during the downturn, Professor Rapp said it was important to reaffirm both the role of universities as a motor for economic recovery and their ability to respond to the expectations and needs of young Europeans.

These messages were reiterated by other plenary speakers at the event, and also by the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso. In a video address he told university leaders that it would be a mistake to cut public and private spending on education and research (during the current downturn) as this could have a 'direct negative impact' on future growth. He also stressed that universities themselves could contribute directly to economic recovery by responding to changing labour market needs. Investing more in education and research would also help Europe emerge from recession faster and in better shape, he noted.

The theme of the EUA Convention was European strategies for Europe's universities – and university leaders debated a wide range of crucial issues for European universities against the background of the economic downturn.

EUA will now use outcomes and discussions of the Convention to develop a 'Prague Declaration' that will include proposals to politicians to support specific action by universities that can make a major difference in helping Europe to beat the economic downturn.

It will outline 10 key areas crucial for ensuring strong universities for a strong Europe in the future. For each of these areas the Declaration will highlight not only the commitments that universities themselves need to make but will also include a series of calls for action from national governments and the European Commission. It will take as its starting point the need to reinforce autonomy as the basis upon which universities will be able to respond to the growing and multiple demands of society, and will tackle crucial issues such as:

- widening participation in universities, and improving lifelong learning opportunities and ensuring relevant and innovative study programmes for all;
- ensuring that European universities have a strong research profile and improving the careers of Europe's young researchers;
- promoting internationalisation and increasing mobility;
- improving quality and transparency in Europe's universities;
- enabling European universities to diversify and increase funding.

The declaration - that will be elaborated by EUA's governing Council on **3 April** – will be presented to Europe's 46 Education Ministers during the Bologna process Ministerial meeting taking place in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve on 28/29 April. It will also include a series of messages relating to the

role of European higher education within the global higher education arena. These issues will feed into the Global Policy Forum that for the first time will be organised as part of the Bologna process meeting in Belgium next month.

Ends

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.

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