

Workshop VI Universities and companies: getting brains in business

By Teresa K uchler, EU Reporter

European universities need to foster a mentality of entrepreneurship in order to compete with the US and other world economies in the field of innovation and creativity.

“Innovation matters more than ever, especially in times of crisis,” Jean-Philippe Courtois, President of Microsoft International. “And it starts with human capital.”

Courtois said he hoped that innovative people, scientists and others, should become the new “icons”, like rock stars or movie stars.

He praised an initiative by the Portuguese government to subsidise the purchase of a so called net book, mini computer, for every household with children between the age of six and 10.

These would be used both in school, making teachers use computers and the internet in their classroom routines, and at home, where older members of the family could get trained in using new technology.

“Our young people are not born entrepreneurs,” said Dr. Martin Schuurmans, Chairman of the Governing Board at the European Institute for Innovation and Technology (EIT).

He said the US, China, India were ahead of Europe when it comes to turning great ideas and innovations into solid economy.

“Universities in Europe need to build education on entrepreneurship, and it is not about business schools starting yet another entrepreneurship class, but about building in entrepreneurial skills in their engineering classes, technology classes, into arts and humanities.”

The EU commissioner for education, training, culture and youth, J an Figel, said Europe lacks the mentality of rewarding those who take initiative, but that his institution was well aware of the situation and had moved rapidly to catch up.

Figel mentioned the newly-founded EIT, and a new branch of the popular Erasmus study exchange programme, “Entrepreneurial Erasmus”, and the fact that entrepreneurship is now listed among the 10 criteria needed to get funding from certain EU structural fund programmes.

Business should nurture innovation among its employees, and make sure they do not let competences escape from the companies as these transform with time and new skills, said Paul Depuydt, CEO of telecom company Alcatel-Lucent Bell.

“People within the company need to be able to transform with their sector, with our company, towards the future”, he said, explaining that Alcatel staff are sent on 55 hours of training a year.

He also supported “innovation boot camps”, where innovative persons get a chance to meet with a team consisting of the company’s innovation board, venture capitalists and other interested parties, in order to come up with a concrete business plan for their ideas.

Secretary of state at the Polish education ministry, Maria Elżbieta Orłowska asked: “How do we get business into universities?” and “How can we [Europe] do what they [US] are doing so well?”

She suggested closer ties between universities and industry, and mobility of top people from both worlds where people from industry and academia swap places for some time.

But not everyone can be entrepreneurs, it was agreed. People with ideas who lack entrepreneurial skills should use strong “innovative clusters”, to turn them into real products.