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COIMBRA GROUP a.s.b.l.

## Tartu Statement

Coimbra Group General Assembly  
Tartu, 19 May 2006

The rectors and representatives of the Coimbra Group universities met at the University of Tartu, Estonia, from 18-19 May 2006 to discuss topics of essential importance for research universities in Europe including: the international competitiveness of European universities, international assessments of university performance and the recent Communication of the European Commission.

### **The international competitiveness of European Universities**

Governments worldwide recognise the vital role that universities play in the evolution of a knowledge-based society through education, basic research and the support of innovation in society and the economy. Although Europe has world class research universities and outstanding areas of expertise, massive investments in education in recent decades have propelled US institutions into leading positions, whilst many Asian countries are now investing heavily in elite institutions with the intention of vying with US pre-eminence. The rectors of the Coimbra Group universities recognise this, and call upon their respective governments and the European Commission to support them in strengthening their capacity to compete globally, to attract global talents and industrial investment and to act as catalysts of cultural vitality.

### **Funding**

The Coimbra Group of universities stresses the critical need to reduce the funding gap between Europe's top universities and their worldwide competitors. Recent studies showing that investment in higher education produces the highest rate of return of any area of public investment would alone justify this, in addition to the catalytic impact of universities in supporting innovation. If our universities are to compete more effectively with the 150 US institutions that receive the bulk of massive Federal research funding, it is imperative that research funding in Europe is more competitive. If the lower levels of research investment in Europe are spread liberally between its 4,000 higher education institutions, few will be able to compete with US institutions or rise to the challenge from Asia, where governments are targeting funds on small groups of universities to propel them into the top rank. Given the great diversity of roles that universities are called on to play, it is imperative that diversification is encouraged amongst Europe's institutions to permit some to compete more strongly in the international research competition, and others to focus on a more local or regional role. The Coimbra Group recognises that this is a difficult political choice on a continent where universities are valued so highly.

### **The Commission's communication, *Modernisation Agenda for Universities***

The communication identifies a number of structural priorities whereby the role of European universities can be strengthened. Universities are perennially adapting themselves to the needs of society, which is why they are the most long-lived of institutions. Whilst some are more forward-looking than others, it would be a mistake to focus on a step change of "modernisation" rather than the continuing process of adaptation. Of the issues raised by the Commission, the Coimbra Group would particularly stress as priorities: the need for greater autonomy (together with greater accountability) to permit universities to adapt and compete more effectively; further harmonisation of study programmes and learning outcomes; removal of barriers to mobility; continued promotion of innovation processes in collaboration with society, government and industry; enhancement of the

international visibility and attractiveness of European universities; and the vital need to develop a long term vision for the development of the European Higher Education and Research Areas.

### **The European Research Council and a European Institute of Technology**

The Coimbra Group re-iterates its strong support for the European Research Council, and advocates that it should be given an increased share of the FP7 budget. The Coimbra Group is also strongly committed to enhancing the capacity of Europe's universities to attract the best global research talents and contributing to globally competitive innovation in the European economy. It recognises the potential of the Commission's proposals for an European Institute of Technology to contribute to these objectives, but believes that this will only be successful if the objectives of an EIT are more precisely defined and if it is planned and implemented in partnership with research-intensive universities rather than in competition with them. It must not contribute to yet more fragmentation of the European Higher Education and Research Areas.

### **Ranking of Universities**

International rankings of universities have become a reality. Though necessarily crude, they help institutions to see their activities in a global context and have enlivened the debate about individual university roles. At the same time, they fail to take into account the diversity of university activities. A diverse system that fulfils a variety of functions cannot be ranked on a common scale. Multi-scale approaches are to be preferred.