



“The voice of SMEs in Europe”

Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE ISSUE

European crafts conference conclusions must not remain a dead letter

- **Education and training, innovation and better regulation main strands for policy action**

Brussels, 19 April 2007. UEAPME, the European craft and SME employers’ organisation, welcomed the final conclusions adopted at the 4th European conference on Craft and Small Enterprises in Stuttgart, Germany on Tuesday 17 April and published by the European Commission today (Thursday) (1). More than 1000 participants agreed on a set of recommendations to improve the competitiveness of the craft and small business sector in Europe, covering issues such as education and training, business support and better regulation, innovation, SME finance, standardisation. UEAPME warned, however, that the conference conclusions will remain a dead letter unless they are followed up with concrete policy actions at national and European level.

“We appreciate the European Commission’s recognition of the importance of crafts and small businesses to create ‘growth and jobs’, which is well reflected in the conference conclusions”, said Hans-Werner Müller, UEAPME Secretary General. “The time is now ripe for decision makers at all levels to transform the conference recommendations into a set of concrete policy actions. European craft and small business owners are ready and willing to do their part in their field of competence.”

The conference singled out three main strands for action, the first of which focuses on increasing the level of the skills base available to crafts and small enterprises and make them more attractive for young people. This can be achieved by improving transparency and mutual recognition of qualifications in vocational education and training, with a special focus on apprenticeship; encouraging mobility of young people within the sector; persuading managers and apprentices to upgrade their skills, especially in key areas such as languages and ICT; and last but not least, by including entrepreneurship in as many education curricula as possible.

A second overall objective is to allow crafts and small enterprises to make the most out of innovation and facilitate the creation of inventive products and services. Business support measures and improved market access are key features in this respect. The contribution of crafts and small businesses to innovation must be recognised and fostered, with a special focus on non-technological improvements. Their needs must also be taken into account in the standardisation process, both during the drafting process and the application phase. Finally, the availability of a wide range of financial schemes must be promoted: this should cover guarantee schemes for loans, including micro-credits, and innovative “mezzanine finance” measures.

The third strand of the conference recommendations specifically dealt with improving the business environment. Participants stressed once again the importance of the “think small first” principle, as foreseen by the European Small Business Charter in 2000: new legislation should be conceived with small businesses in mind from the very beginning, and existing rules should be screened for compliance. The goal to lessen the costs arising from administrative bureaucracy by 25% in the next five years was seen by participants as a first step towards a comprehensive reduction strategy, the effects of which should be directly felt by European crafts and small businesses. *“If properly translated into legislation, these recommendations could really cut the red tape and roll out the red carpet for European small businesses”,* continued Mr Müller.

“The European Commission has stated that it will use the Stuttgart declaration in forthcoming policy initiatives. We trust it will live up to the expectations it created, and we thank it once again for the good collaboration. Europe needs better-trained, more innovative, less bureaucracy-burdened crafts and small businesses – we urge all stakeholders to make every effort in their respective fields to this end”, he concluded.

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(1) http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/entrepreneurship/craft/craft-fourth-conference/doc/declaration_all_in_one_de_fr_en.pdf

EDITORS’ NOTES: UEAPME is the employers’ organisation representing crafts, trades and SMEs from the EU and accession countries at European level. UEAPME has 81 member organisations, which represent crafts and SMEs across Europe, covering over 11 million enterprises with 50 million employees. UEAPME is a European Social Partner.

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