



**TOWARDS A DIVERSIFIED, RESPONSIVE AND
COMPETITIVE
EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Policy Priorities

Communicated to the Ministers of EHEA by EURASHE



TOWARDS A DIVERSIFIED, RESPONSIVE AND COMPETITIVE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Bucharest, 26-27 April 2012

INTRODUCTION

Being the voice of professional higher education and a consultative member of the Bologna Follow-up Group, EURASHE is very pleased to communicate this positioning paper and policy priorities: “Towards a Diversified, Responsive and Competitive European Higher Education” to the Ministers of EHEA, on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference and Bologna Policy Forum, Bucharest, 26-27 April 2012.

EURASHE is the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education who offer professionally-oriented programmes and are engaged in applied and profession-related research within the Bologna cycles. We profess a broad interpretation of ‘teaching and learning’, including non-formal and informal contexts, which is based on applied sciences, arts and technologies, and prepares prospective graduates for a smooth transition from training and learning into the working life.

EURASHE holds the view that all institutions of higher education have a three-fold mission, i.e. teaching, research and services to the community. Their scope and focus depend on the specific profile and mission of the institution, and may have varying stresses and outputs. Professionally-oriented institutions and programmes with their close links to stakeholders emphasise a key role of learning, share a broad interpretation of innovation and research, aiming at practical applications and outcomes.

As a stakeholders’ organisation, influential in 47 countries inside and outside the European Higher Education Area, EURASHE is engaged in diverse fields, which include: quality assurance, qualifications frameworks, lifelong learning, employability, applied research and the social dimension of higher education. Within these higher-education activities, we cooperate with public and private sectors at national and European levels. Through our vast and diversified membership, which operates at both programme and institutional levels, we also promote the link between higher and vocational education. Moreover, we are well positioned in the major social-dimension themes, which include **lifelong learning, employability and student-centred learning**.

EURASHE acknowledges that **National Qualifications Frameworks** effectively enable and enhance opportunities for access, transfer and progression between cycles and within different European systems, provided, of course, transparent and approved external and internal **quality assurance** systems are in operation.

In a local and regional context, together with our segment of Universities of Applied Sciences (also grouped in the UASnet partnership), EURASHE actively and strongly supports **innovation and research**, in line with what was stated in the Leuven Communiqué (2009):

Higher education should be based at all levels on state of the art research and development thus fostering innovation and creativity in society.

In March 2010, we published “**EURASHE’s 10 Commitments for the European Higher Education Area in 2020**” especially for the ‘Bologna’ Ministers convening in Budapest and Vienna, an occasion which celebrated the establishment of the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA). In this publication we clarified our views on priority areas of the Bologna process and amplified our own responsibilities towards the realisation of the main objectives. We were then communicating an optimistic outlook on how to implement the different areas covered in the 2009 Leuven Ministerial Communiqué, whilst realising that progress in each domain very much depended on the willingness of governments and stakeholders to reform higher education for the benefit of all participants.

Now, two years on, and three years after the Leuven Communiqué, EURASHE has come to realise that greater effort is needed to reach the identified priorities. Professionally-oriented higher education is strongly encouraged to work effectively with EURASHE, and members should also be empowered to respond proactively to the agreed reforms within the professional sector.

I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

During the 1990s fundamental world-wide changes occurred following the rise of international markets, communication and information technology in the 1980s. These can be summarised in terms of the globalisation, individualisation, digitalisation and information boom. The economic and financial crisis of the 2000s has not only deepened and hastened these world-wide changes, but also set new challenges to the world in terms of restructuring the knowledge society through new creative energies and innovation and formulating new responses to the issues of climate change and immigration as well as to the widening gap between rich and poor.

Higher education has to be deeply involved in these new and related phases both through education and training (new competences for new jobs in lifelong learning), through (applied) research and the new knowledge to be implemented through high-impact innovation. The current world of work also needs more and better-educated and multi-skilled graduates. Consequently, higher-education institutions are experiencing the need to reformulate their institutional missions and strategies.

'Bologna', and the education reforms promoted by the EU, have contributed to formulating answers to these new international challenges. Yet, they have been implemented mostly in diverse national structures, instead of really reshaping structures and processes in the wide range of higher-education institutions. The EHEA, structurally, is becoming a multi-stranded international entity; but as yet, it is not felt to be at the heart of higher education.

Worryingly, the current economic crisis induces particular governments to cut the budget of (higher) education and research, which, undoubtedly, has consequences for programmes and curricula in disciplines that are not activated by, or respond to immediate market demands, but are vitally necessary for a progressive and sustainable European society.

Moreover, a large group of learners do not seem to benefit according to their capacities from the present mainly linear provision and its offer of programmes and courses. This is the current situation, despite the fact that the concept of lifelong learning has been assembled in stone, comprising a Lifelong Learning Charter and endorsed by countries of the EHEA.

In a similar way, the European Union 2020 Strategy with its concrete education-linked objectives of increase of higher-education graduates to 40 per cent in the age brackets of 30-34 has not met with sufficient response in all countries. There has also been a lack of satisfactory institutional response to the varying needs of (new and diversified) groups of learners.

II. RESPONSE FROM PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION TO IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES FOR SOCIETY & HIGHER EDUCATION

For this forthcoming Ministerial gathering, we are reformulating our intentions and reaffirming our commitments on behalf of the diverse institutions of professional higher education we represent. We are doing so, fully aware of the challenges the institutions and sectors/programmes are facing in a period of economic and financial downturn. At the same time we are maintaining our firm belief in a process of reform of higher education which has already shown its effect, and has made steady transparent progress, though not everywhere at the same pace and neither in all fields of undergraduate and postgraduate education and training. We believe that robust and systemic investment in (higher) education and learning is a key response not only to the current crisis, but to long-term challenges which our societies face.

We are looking again at the domains we identified back then in 2010, and at the expectations we were then expressing for each of them, and how we were hoping to contribute to their further achievement. This paper also focuses on a next stage, namely the realisation of the operational objectives, and what this requires from decision makers by the next Ministerial meeting of the EHEA, which is scheduled to take place in Yerevan in 2015.

A. National Qualifications Frameworks and Student Centred Learning

EURASHE believes that National Qualifications Frameworks lie at the heart of efforts to transform higher education in Europe. They offer a means to increase significantly the opportunities for access, transfer and progression within and between different European educational jurisdictions, whilst promoting employability and lifelong learning by offering multiple entry and access points. Qualifications Frameworks also make European higher education more accessible and comprehensible for students from outside Europe without compromising the diversity of European higher-education provision. Professional higher education is a distinctive part of this diversity and regularisation, and EURASHE encourages its members in their efforts to participate in global exchanges in higher education and promote the attractiveness of the EHEA.

Within National Qualifications Frameworks, the establishment of learning outcomes as a central component places learners, rather than systems or institutions, at the heart of higher education. Focusing on learning outcomes at institutional level ensures appropriate attention to design, delivery and assessment of learning and encourages a student-centred learning mind-set and culture across higher-education institutions.

In relation to Qualifications Frameworks, learning outcomes and the student-centred learning approach, **EURASHE holds that:**

- focusing on learning outcomes is crucial for linking programmes to Qualifications Frameworks and the profiling of institutions;
- based on specifics of study programmes, learning outcomes enable institutions to choose a holistic approach and bring an external world focus to the programmes, making learning social, active, contextual, engaging and student-owned;

- proper implementation of Qualifications Frameworks ensures full involvement of students in programme design, institutional governance and quality assurance. Learning outcomes should be a distinctive feature in the dimension of employability, facilitating students to become responsible and active lifelong learners with developed motivation, social skills, capability and capacity for self-evaluation, time management skills and skills to access information. Qualifications Frameworks are instruments of transparency, for the defining and redefining of curricula, (applied) research and institutional management in line with their missions and profiles;
- qualifications frameworks make it easier to improve national and international higher educational quality and quality assurance, and also mobility in particular.

We therefore urge Ministers to:

- promote general wider understanding and awareness of the European Qualifications Framework, National Qualifications Frameworks and learning outcomes for access, transfer and progression in higher education on national and EU level and for employability and lifelong learning;
- ensure that the professional higher-education qualifications are granted full recognition by member states and all higher-education institutions in the EHEA, in accordance with the QF-EHEA and commitments under the Lisbon Recognition;
- incorporate innovative labour-market oriented short-cycle higher-education programmes into National Qualifications Frameworks and ensure appropriate recognition and access to further cycles of higher education for the holders of these qualifications;
- highlight the qualifications profile and distinctive pedagogic approaches of professional higher education as features in the global attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area;
- provide and support personal development of higher-education institution management and staff, exchange of good practice and collaboration related to learning outcomes and the on-going reflective process of a student-centred learning approach.

We confirm our previous commitment to:

- promote the key role of Qualifications Frameworks, learning outcomes across the sector we represent;
- strengthen our dialogue with employers and the world of work using the Qualifications Frameworks and the language of learning outcomes in order to better understand and translate their needs and expectations towards higher-education outcomes both at systemic and institutional level;
- provide a platform for sharing best practices and seeking inspiration as regards to the potential of sector- and/or profession-specific objectives, methods and assessment in higher-education learning which would place the students and learners into the very centre of the process;
- support higher-education institutions who invest in a student-centred learning approach, especially those who commit themselves to the link between learning outcomes and employability.

B. Employability and Lifelong Learning

EURASHE believes that the best long-term future for the citizens of Europe is one in which employability, rather than immediate employment, is fully focused, and that it is inextricably linked to the constant pursuit of self-development and professional fulfilment through lifelong learning. EURASHE ascertains that the higher-education institutions it represents are committed to ensuring that graduates of their institutions are prepared as fully for the world of work as possible. It is further our opinion, that the inculcation of a culture of lifelong learning in graduates and the provision of lifelong learning opportunities are key elements of the mission for graduates of the institutions that EURASHE represents.

The envisaged enhancement of participation in higher education as well as responding to changing environment and requirements through lifelong learning concept is likely to bring to higher education new target groups of learners. In order to respect their experience, ambitions, expectations and learning conditions, new approaches leading to effective and efficient learning, e.g. recognition of prior learning, may be adopted widely, without threatening the quality of achieved qualifications.

We urge Ministers to:

- promote flexible and interconnected system of higher education embedded within the lifelong learning with flexible entry and exit points, with effective and flexible routes that allow learners to progress seamlessly through all levels of national frameworks and thus ensure that higher education is accessible to non-traditional learners;
- raise and promote the culture of lifelong learning as a response to societal, labour market and technological challenges and as a way of promoting personal developments of individuals;
- initiate gathering and access to data on employability of higher-education graduates, labour market prospects in order to empower the understanding and qualified decisions of both higher-education institutions and individuals;
- make steps for making individuals' study paths through higher education more effective and efficient by acknowledging the role of recognition of prior learning, whilst setting conditions for its transparency and correspondence within an overall quality assurance culture and its principles and standards.

To give effect to these policy objectives EURASHE commits itself to:

- promote the flexibility of systems and programmes and thus ensure that higher education is accessible to non-traditional learners;
- further promote activities and tools leading to full integration of the lifelong learning agenda and its activities into policy, mission, courses and services of individual institutions of professional higher education;
- offer a platform for discussion, networks and projects to stimulate policy exchange on training policies to increase employability, as well as to exchange good practices on teaching and learning methodologies in higher education, approaches how to transfer knowledge, skills and competences that make graduates more employable including elements like placements, practical experience, work-based learning etc.

- work with national and sectorial organisations to promote recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a means of credentializing the attainment of learning outcomes in non-formal and informal learning environments;
- enhance - for the given purposes of collaboration and mutual dialogue with the employers, the world of work and other stakeholders - responses to their needs, expectations and informing them on developments, potential and capacity of higher-education institutions.

C. Quality Assurance and Transparency Tools

Quality Assurance has been the domain where the cooperation of the Bologna Process stakeholders has proven to be most effective. The E4 partners, ENQA, EUA, ESU and EURASHE received their mandate first to draft the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* and then to set up the *Register for Quality Assurance Agencies* (EQAR). **EURASHE** continues, jointly with the ‘E4’ partners to contribute to the proceedings of the BFUG working group on Quality Assurance and Transparency Tools, as well as to the further development and review of the tools for quality assurance.

As already formulated in our “**10 Commitments**”, EURASHE cooperates with international authorities and other stakeholders’ organisations to “identify and develop such qualitative and quantitative descriptors and indicators that will ensure the practical usefulness of the multidimensional instruments to the prospective learner”.

EURASHE further holds the view that:

- EQAR-registration reflects a shared trust, but not a choice of a quality assurance model or quality assurance system. It is part of the mission of EQAR to guarantee a diversity in quality assurance models, but it is the responsibility of policy makers to choose a model that fits their national requirements;
- it is a government responsibility to create clarity and transparency to stakeholders and society about the external quality assurance, ranking and classification systems used in higher education. In this overall framework, each function or process in the mission of higher-education institutions, such as teaching and learning within a wide range of organisational management, research, student services and facilities etc., needs an appropriate approach and form of evaluation;
- institutions may benefit from transparency tools that respect the diversity in higher education in an accessible way, provided they are unequivocal, free from marketing considerations and are subject to independent supervision.

We urge Ministers to:

- adopt quality assurance models that are in line with the principles and priorities of the Bologna Process, of which they are supportive instruments rather than objectives in themselves;
- affirm the institutions’ ownership of quality assurance, as a key instrument of their quality enhancement, a basis of their accountability, and a reflection of their necessary autonomy;

- support the involvement of all stakeholders in quality assurance in order to recognise their indisputable role in contributing to a fair and full qualitative picture;
- demonstrate, develop, explain and implement the link and relation between quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes on a national level;
- entrust the 'E4' group with presenting a proposal for the revision of the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* in close consultation with *Education International*, *BUSINESSEUROPE* and the *European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)*;
- promote general wider understanding amongst institutions regarding the linkage of external and internal quality assurance to stakeholders and also to international higher-education landscapes.

D. Mobility and International Openness

Mobility has been at the heart of the Bologna Process since its inception: and the ultimate aim of creating what would become the European Higher Education Area was to create more 'transparency' in European higher education, which would facilitate recognition, the accepted and established cornerstone of academic mobility. The added value of the input of professional higher education has been to broaden the scope of the mobility experience by incorporating internships, professional and work experience in the exchange practices. Engagement with the formally recognised types of mobility is greatly enhanced, when mobility is in line with institutional profiles and the learning paths of individual students. In a global world, the international openness of European higher education is becoming an established reality.

EURASHE therefore holds the view that:

- the notion of mobility has to be diversified and become an overarching concept including both physical and virtual mobility: and its recognition should be irrespective of its duration;
- the content of mobility should be within the remit of the 'institutional' or even 'programme level', at the choice of the individual institution, which enables institutions to emphasise the vocational aspects of an exchange experience;
- institutions should have the liberty to give mobility 'different faces', from the purely academic to 'mobility for jobs', in line with the supporting profile of a programme or institution;
- the student who chooses a specific qualification or programme, should have the option of a 'related mobility' which is in line with his/her learning experience.

EURASHE believes that in order to achieve the policy intentions, we must:

- expand the mobility of students in all EHEA countries, in all three cycles and in its various forms;
- promote the equal participation of diverse student groups in mobility;
- ensure the high quality of mobility for learners;
- promote the mobility of teachers, early-stage researchers and other staff in higher education;

- strengthen and further develop the higher-education institutions in the EHEA as environments for international academic exchange and as providers of internationally-skilled graduates.

We therefore urge Ministers to:

- maintain records of all forms and types of mobility, including short-term mobility, and also the ones that are presently excluded from financing through the EU programmes;
- actively support and co-finance all forms of mobility, which is in line with the diversified profiles and missions of higher-education programmes and institutions;
- intensify work on recognition and transparency tools, including inter-sectorial mobility;
- enable better access for mobility for all groups of potential learners.

E. Research, Development and Innovation

In the aforementioned 2010 position paper, EURASHE committed itself to contributing actively “to the transfer of research results in society through innovation and an applied-research based higher education with a special focus on regional development, without neglecting the global perspective”. For this, we would “cooperate closely with the world of employment, acknowledging that in a regional context, public institutions (schools & kindergartens, polyclinics, social service centres, etc.) as well as small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are natural partners for professional higher education.”

EURASHE, now in partnership with the network of Universities of Applied Sciences (UASnet), proclaims that a successful strategy for the implementation of an Innovation Union policy has to strive for ***economic prosperity*** whilst securing ***societal welfare***. This requires a ***sustainable innovation basis***, which invests in building strategic alliances to foster ***innovation creativity and dissemination***.

The context in which this should happen is explained in a separate joint paper “**Position paper on Research and Innovation from EURASHE and UASnet for the Ministerial meeting in Bucharest 26-27 April 2012**”.

In order to implement successfully an Innovation Union policy, **EURASHE urges that Ministers:**

- find ways for European funds to act as leverage for better collaboration between member states and complementary sources of public and private funding, with a specific focus on impact driven innovation and research projects;
- develop a framework that makes use of new research performance indicators, with an expected output in 4 domains: science, education, society and the professions;
- involve the whole innovation cycle by stimulating the building of stronger knowledge alliances between SMEs, public organisations, regions, regional training centres and Universities of Applied Sciences throughout Europe;

- involve those enterprises and organisations (like SMEs) who experience the need to innovate, but do not have an extensive R&D infrastructure in place;
- align the Education, Structural and Framework Funds in a 'smart combination', which will contribute to a fast response to the innovation and research needs of the world of work;
- strengthen Marie Curie by investing in professional and industrial PhDs in order to deliver a new generation of impact driven researchers to Europe.

III. CONCLUSION

Our past experience of contributing to setting up 'Bologna', with the development of priority areas, has taught us that it is essential that the dynamics of the process should not be lost; we believe the stakeholders' model is a guarantee for this.

We therefore express our hope that this valuable cooperation of governments and stakeholders is maintained, so as to ensure that the implementation of the process is balanced across the different stakeholders.

Summarising our priorities in the further realisation of the EHEA for the years to come, we can see the following:

- we think it is essential to more clearly define **lifelong learning**, which takes into account the wide range of paths and ways of learning, as it will help develop more targeted policies on access to higher education for a diverse student population;
- in line with this, more support is needed for the **recognition of prior learning**, as a means to widening access at all levels of higher education;
- **mobility** of all learners and young graduates has to remain the focus of the EHEA, which has to encompass 'lifelong mobility' opportunities;
- in the realms of **quality assurance**, higher-education institutions would benefit from more European-targeted actions, which encourage, support and monitor the implementation of quality-assurance processes at various levels within and across institutions. This practice could lead to bilateral and multilateral agreements (also involving quality assurance agencies) in order to cooperate, share views, instruments, services and good practice in the area of quality assurance and transparency instruments, which could also be cost-saving. Where appropriate, there should be protection against external pressures or interventions that may be detrimental to quality and quality assurance practices;
- the **diversified offer** of higher-education programmes and institutions, each with their own mission, profile and targeted student public, satisfies a need in the employment market;
- the specific contribution to knowledge creation by higher-education institutions focusing on **impact-driven innovation and applied research** should have the highest profile.

At this stage of the reform process, the implementation of the above priorities has to occur within institutions in order to be sustainable, continuous and financially stable. A corollary, therefore, is that **government incentives for institutions** are needed in response to lingering economies and weakened job markets.

Investing in education is a means to safeguard current levels of welfare and well-being of citizens, and even more vitally, it gives subsequent generations opportunities to build their own future. A European Higher Education Area that profiles the above, guarantees that its sustainable future will also be competitive on a global scale.

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European Association of Institutions in Higher Education

Ravensteingalerij 27 / 3
1000 Brussels
Belgium

Tel: 0032 (0)2 211 41 97
Fax: 0032 (0)2 211 41 99

eurashe@eurashe.eu
www.eurashe.eu