



EURASHE 'S VILNIUS STATEMENT FOR BERGEN

PREAMBLE

1 The *European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE)* was founded in Patras, Greece in February 1990. Its members are national organizations of presidents, rectors, directors or principals of higher education institutions and individual institutions.

2 Professional higher education is found in all European countries, either clearly visible as a separate education track (in countries having the 'binary system'), sometimes as 'professional tracks' within traditional universities (in a unitary higher education system). In a binary system they may be called Colleges, University Colleges, hogescholen, Polytechnics, Hautes Ecoles, Universities of Applied Sciences, and other equivalent translations in the national European languages.¹ Degrees offered range from (professionally oriented) Bachelor and Master - and in some countries academically oriented Bachelor and Master degrees, and PhD degrees in cooperation with universities - to an 'intermediate' degree (short-cycle degree, sometimes called associate degree).

Given the diversity of the sector a need is felt for a common denominator that encompasses all degree awarding institutions. Next to the broad term Higher Education Institution, the term University College could offer a solution for these degree-awarding HE institutions.

3 Since the Prague meeting of Ministers in 2001, EURASHE effectively represents the professionally oriented higher education sector in the Bologna Process, and we confirm our strong commitment to the Bologna Process and to the efforts leading to the achievement of the Lisbon goals.

EURASHE' S POLICY IN RELATION TO THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

1 The Qualifications Framework in the context of Quality Assurance and Life Long Learning

Transparency of the EHE structure

4 A key factor in the Bologna Process for stakeholders (students, HEIs) and for the outside world is transparency in European higher education: transparency in the degree

¹ The fields of study covered by these HEIs are numerous, and a non-exhaustive list comprises: economics and business studies, science, engineering and technology, fine and performing arts, architecture, health care, agriculture, teacher training, social work, and other major disciplines that have an applied track

system, transparency in the diversification of trainings offered, transparency in the educational structures in the Bologna countries.

The Bologna Process has already been leading to more transparency in the HE structures, but more efforts are still needed to give students, teachers and other stakeholders a clear view of useful national and international pathways in European Higher Education.

The degree structure

5 Professional first and second cycle programmes are fully equal to the other degree programmes. It should follow from this that there is an easy transfer between professional and research oriented programmes and vice versa. This may also include options of professional doctorates (as part of the third cycle) depending on the needs of the country in question.

Quality assurance in cooperation with other stakeholders

6 EURASHE fully supports the ENQA report prepared for the Bergen meeting about the standards and guidelines for QA, including the establishment of a European register of quality assurance agencies and the European Register Committee. This report results from a consultation among the E4 Group (ENQA, EUA, ESIB and EURASHE). We strongly emphasize our willingness to continue these efforts and would like to broaden the scope of cooperation and consultation within E4 to other fields than QA.

Within this framework EURASHE gives particular emphasis to the following aspects of QA, which it has already raised in relevant discussions with ENQA, ESIB and EUA.

- a) independence of external agencies should be safeguarded by including the nomination and appointment of each agency's council or board independently from governments, higher education institutions and organs of political influence.
- b) all aspects of QA agencies (e.g. council/board, external experts and determination of outcomes) will reflect all types of HEIs.
- c) the role of the European Register Committee should include monitoring continuous compliance with the admission requirement, conditions and European standards.

7 Creating a quality culture in our institutions is primarily the responsibility of each HEI, but it is necessary that both on national and international level support is given to establish and further develop the ongoing process. Also more financial support is needed for HEIs who are organising QA internally and with external assessors.

The QFW linked to the broader European framework of qualifications for lifelong learning (EQF)

8 The Bologna process has come up with other important elements in order to build the EHEA, such as the European Qualifications Framework for higher education and the international recognition of degrees.

The Copenhagen process is working on an even wider European Qualifications Framework where higher education and professional and vocational training will be recognized and validated. Competences seem to be able to bridge the gap between ECTS, VET and learning outcomes. Quality assurance and accreditation are sure to play a key role in the establishment of international trust as a necessary foundation of the future Europe

9 EURASHE wants to contribute to the implementation of the European overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles and with generic descriptors for each cycle based on competences including learning outcomes and credit ranges. This European framework should incite the member states to elaborate their own national qualifications framework, compatible with the overarching EQF.

2 Greater Employability based on Competence-building

Competence-based centres of knowledge and innovation

10 Relevance of programmes for the labour market has always been a core value and finds expression in the mission statements of most institutions in the University College/Polytechnic Sector. The course accreditation assessment and examination systems in many institutions in this sector reflect the impact of industry, business and the professions on the education provided. In the College/Polytechnic Sector, it is not uncommon for peer review experts, external examiners etc. to be drawn from the world of work.

11 The programmes offered are also practice-oriented: work placements and internships are an integrated part with the periods of study; the majority of the graduates entering the labour market have a first-cycle degree, which is in line with the Bologna objective that all first cycle graduates should be immediately employable in the labour market; a large number of first and second cycle graduates have through their professionally accredited study programmes access to the professions that have been regulated on a European level.

12 By offering trainings which have an immediate relevance for the labour market, the degrees and diplomas granted by professional HE institutions ensure a high employability ratio for their graduates. This close cooperation also enables the HEIs to tune their programmes to the varying needs of the world of labour.

13 It is of great importance that professional higher education institutions develop into regional centres of knowledge and innovation and generate knowledge and solutions “on demand”, particularly in cooperation with SME’s, thus contributing to the development of local economies and communities. This will also have an immediate effect on the HEIs themselves: courses will be upgraded and become more science-based and a new culture will develop among staff. Strategic alliances may be formed with universities in the same region, in order to coordinate cooperation with stakeholders in industry and the world of employment.

The European dimension :

14 Intercultural and multilingual competencies of graduates may enhance their employability on a European level and will contribute to a tolerant and open European citizenship.

Further stimuli are needed to encourage students and graduates to learn the other European languages. Intercultural understanding presupposes an open attitude and willingness to learn and respect the culture and traditions of others. This will ultimately enhance European citizenship.

3 Applied research in a regional setting

15 Most professional HEIs have a strong regional embedding. Their graduates have a qualification that is easily recognized because the colleges have a longstanding and structural cooperation with industry and local authorities. HEIs as knowledge and innovation centres in their region can contribute to regional development.

16 EURASHE finds it important to stress the role of professional HE in the development of the European Research Area (ERA) and the European knowledge economy. Professional HEIs offering two-cycle education have since long developed their own research capacities in their immediate regional environment, and have because of this had a strong influence on regional development.

Many of these university colleges are now opening up to innovative practices of cooperation with the world of employment, and are training both staff and students for collaborative research, often in cooperation with traditional universities. At the moment public research financing is only minimally accessible to the professional higher education institutions, and the possibility for third cycle research is virtually non-existent in most countries.

A spirit of Entrepreneurship and innovation

17 Till now the results of our efforts to reach the Lisbon objectives with the goal to become the most competitive continent by 2010, have not been too promising. If we want to make better progress economic activity, entrepreneurship and innovation have to increase at all levels and in all sectors of European society and industry.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises on their own do not always have sufficient R&D capacity for real innovations and therefore rely on cooperation with other partners in this respect.

Entrepreneurship and innovation are of vital importance for the development of a region. The spirit of innovation is available in many professional HEIs, but cannot be fully exploited for lack of sufficient public funding.

There is a growing awareness that sustainable entrepreneurship has a social dimension, as the popularity of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) clearly shows.

18 Professional higher education has only limited access to research funding. What is an acquisition in some countries should be extended across Europe.

However, all degree programmes should be research- and innovation-linked.

Qualifications for doctoral programmes and the disciplines eligible for these should be brought more in line with present day evolutions in society, so that the available resources for research in all Higher Education Institutions can be brought to full capacity.

4 Wider accessibility to higher education

19 Many of the institutions that EURASHE represents have a long and proud tradition in the provision of part-time, continuing and second chance education for the communities they serve, particularly at local and regional levels. The objective of Lisbon that 50 % of the young should have completed higher education can only be reached by removing obstacles for free access to higher education, and by providing adequate regulations that stimulate the process of widening access.

This can be reached by supporting financially those HEIs whose mission it is to strive for a better access, and which are adapting their structures and adjusting their study programmes in order to incorporate new groups of students.

Secondly, by incorporating life long learning in a flexible way, through the recognition of Acquired Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) schemes, the validation of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning and the creation and strengthening of learning paths and learning methods to accommodate non-traditional learners.

20 EURASHE supports the inclusion of Higher Education Short Cycle (HESC) within the first cycle in the overarching Framework of Qualifications. Short-cycle programmes leading up to the first cycle, may also be instrumental in creating opportunities for the validation of non-formal education, and will widen access to higher education. The role of HESC in the social and cultural integration process in Europe should also be recognized. In some countries there are regulations in force to widen the accessibility, but more opportunities must be created for other groups of students from a background that have no tradition of higher education studies.

5 The social dimension of higher education

21 The social dimension in HE is about equal access, progress and completion of higher education. It also implies that HE is looked upon as a public good, and not exclusively a tradable commodity. The Bologna Process clearly has a social dimension, as one of its goals is to open up higher education to a larger group of learners. In order to make higher education equally accessible to all, appropriate conditions must be created for the students, so that they can complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. In a broader sense the social dimension includes all aspects of the social environment and relevance of education. University colleges have always been conscious of the emancipatory role of education and have brought in all stakeholders in their institutions through management, curriculum development, applied research, quality assurance and services.

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Adequate funding must therefore be provided to remove all obstacles.

There should be more stimuli for student mobility efforts in the three cycles of HE, with a special focus on the (professional) first cycle.

As a concrete action we propose that the social dimension be a theme of the next stocktaking exercise by the BFUG in 2007.

EURASHE is also willing to participate in a survey on the impact of the social and economic background of students in professional higher education in a number of Bologna countries.

6. Partnerships with Bologna neighbouring countries and further in the world

23 Many HEIs have links with partners in the neighbouring regions, of which the countries are not signatories of the European Cultural Convention, or have started providing crossborder education in other regions of the world. It is out of concern for maintaining the quality of these relations and the forms of education provided within such frameworks that we want to contribute to making bridges towards those countries that are seeking contacts with 'Bologna' countries. In our relation with other regions we aim at a balance between

cooperation and competition. Professional HEIs should be encouraged to cooperate with their counterparts in other regions, and be free to decide on the form of cooperation.

24 It is important to inform the countries not involved in the Bologna Process of ongoing evolutions within the EHEA. This is not only the task of governments, but also of individual HEIs.

With those countries in the world with which Europe is in competition, as they are also offering transnational education, a balance must be sought between competing with them and informing them of how the Bologna Process is developing.

25 If the institutions want to play a role (in the field of professional higher education) in informing the countries outside the EHEA about the Bologna Process, more funding is needed to finance contacts between HEIs in 'Bologna' countries and their counterparts in neighbouring regions and in other regions in the world.

Concrete forms of cooperation with other regions could imply the creation of joint degrees on the bachelor level, and bachelor graduates should also be eligible for European programmes like Erasmus Mundus.

CONCLUSION

26 EURASHE wants to extend an open hand to the various initiatives that are taken by Higher Education Institutions and the organisations of the students in Europe, whether they are in the academic or professionally oriented track. Though the diversity of Higher Education is generally viewed by stakeholders as an asset, a need is perceived to come forward as one movement with its own specific focus.

A sustainable higher education and research in the first place require better funding.

For historical reasons university colleges are not entitled to a financing that is in line with their student numbers, nor does the present level of funding in most European countries keep track with recent developments in our sector (research missions, wider access of education, quality assurance, services to the community, etc.). This clearly puts the professional higher education in a difficult position, if they want to fulfil their task as HEIs towards their stakeholders.

The six action lines of this 'Vilnius Statement for Bergen' clearly reflect our main concerns, which we share with many others in the European Higher Education Area, and who are seeking our support. Only in unison with like-minded and in full cooperation with the other stakeholders of the professionally oriented higher education institutions, such as the students and their future employers, and in dialogue with the universities can we be successful in realising an open and inclusive higher education area, while at the same time attaining the objectives of the Lisbon strategy.

Vilnius (Lithuania), 29 April 2005