

Moving Professional Higher Education into 'Bologna post 2010'

STATEMENT FOR THE MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE IN
LEUVEN / LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE
FROM THE PART OF PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

I. PREAMBLE: MISSION OF PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) is an international association of European higher education institutions that give primary emphasis to the professional aspect of higher education and applied research, such as Polytechnics, Universities, Universities of Applied Sciences, University Colleges and Colleges of Higher Education, and which affirm themselves as Professional Higher Education within the first, second, and in some cases third cycle structure of the Bologna Process. EURASHE sees as the main features of professional higher education its close link with the world of employment, a focus on employability and a regional embedding of HE institutions.

As the voice of professional HE on a European level, we aim at contributing to the progressive development of the European Higher Education Area, especially through our active involvement in the Bologna process and in cooperation with EUA, ESU, ENQA and other major stakeholders.

We believe that the means by which the EHEA can be realised are the development of national QF linked to the European qualifications framework, transparency in the HE structure, the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders and the establishment of trust through quality assurance and accreditation.

Professional HEIs, which aim at educating and training young professionals for a career in accordance to their specific missions and profiles, continuously have to align their objectives and update their programmes to respond to the demands of the labour market, and to the needs of society at large. In the current economic and financial crisis, however, a more proactive attitude is needed to anticipate future needs of the world of employment, and to keep our graduates employable, while at the same time maintaining the perspective of a broader societal relevance.

II. TO CONTINUE THE PROCESS ON THE FOUNDATION OF PAST ACHIEVEMENTS

The Bologna Process has brought about a number of achievements, through the active involvement of all stakeholders, and as we think they are essential for the process, they should be kept as synergetic objectives. They are the elaboration of **Quality Assurance** procedures both on the policy level and in their practical implementation, the application of the **stakeholders' model**, and the focus on **student-centred learning** through learning outcomes.

▪ **Converging in the field of Quality Assurance**

Convergence on Quality Assurance matters is an essential ingredient of a European HEA that wants to be relevant for its immediate environment and also be able to play a role on a global sphere. Such a positioning can only be made, if it is underpinned by shared principles of quality and a common methodology for quality assurance. The further and ongoing quality development in HE - and for that reason also a culture of quality and adequate quality assurance mechanisms, based on trust rather than control, contribute to the construction of a successful EHEA.

▪ **Maintaining the Stakeholders model**

No party can claim to have exclusive ownership of the process, which would be inconsistent with the move towards a higher education that is relevant for the entire society.

The development of quality assurance processes in the BP has contributed to identifying the main stakeholders of European HE, namely the students (and through them the parental support, as co-investors in education), the institutions, their education staff, the employers in the business and not-for-profit sectors, and all other societal actors on a national and regional level. The involvement of stakeholders is already apparent in (internal and external) QA, but also increasingly in governance of institutions and the elaboration of new programmes and curricula.

▪ **Shifting towards a student-centred higher education, focusing on Learning Outcomes**

The societal relevance of a qualification or training is largely determined by the appropriateness of its learning outcomes, when checked against the employability opportunities of its graduates.

The learning outcomes are the foundation of the learning and evaluation processes, and essential from a lifelong learning and personal development perspective. They are also a basis for international mobility, cooperation and recognition, and the cornerstone for a societal contract involving all stakeholders.

It is also imperative that the learning outcomes are developed at the level of the specific disciplines, as this is where the main expertise lies. In addition, the work on learning outcomes at the discipline level will involve academics, students and professionals in a true bottom-up approach, which is in line with the spirit of the Bologna reform.

III. TO IMPLEMENT THE REFORM IN THE INSTITUTIONS AND TO ESTABLISH IT IN THE MINDS OF STAKEHOLDERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY AT LARGE

Through a broad consultation EURASHE identified the following priority areas that contain the expectations and concerns of professional Higher Education and of a broad range of stakeholders for the post-Bologna era, and which should take the process of reform to a further stage.

▪ A holistic reform process needed

After a period of ten years focusing on national legislative and on structural reforms, more attention is needed for a holistic approach, focusing on content.

A convergence of systems is bringing the policies of the participating countries more in line with each other. However, such harmonisation is to be established in a 'natural way', as a reform on a voluntary basis has been the hallmark of the Bologna process from its inception. To achieve this, it is important to mobilise all stakeholders, who are to reap the benefits of the reform process. In accordance with this line of thinking a close consultation with the world of employment, from both business and not-for-profit sectors is required, and in all procedures due care should be taken of the real demands of the labour market.

▪ Implementation at an institutional level

In view of the different perceptions of the achievements of the reform among the stakeholders, concrete strategies for implementing the process on an institutional level are to be elaborated, with operational objectives and clear indicators of progress that will help institutions to measure their progress in the various action lines that are of immediate concern to them.

Therefore attention should be paid to engaging the management of the institutions, their staff and not the least the mass of students.

▪ Broad national Qualifications Frameworks

The countries participating in the process have to make it their work to develop broad NQFs, aligned to the overarching QF of the EHEA, and incorporating Lifelong Learning provisions, starting from a student-centred education, and based on learning outcomes.

The development of Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks on a European level could be a useful addition, as it guarantees the involvement of the stakeholders of a specific sector.

- **A diversified profile of higher education institutions**

HEIs are ready to play a role in the regional environment and/or on an international scale, depending on their profile and mission.

If higher education wants to fully play its role of catalyst of change processes in society, higher educational institutions have to be visible with their opportunities and study fields already at the first cycle level.

The specific role of professional HE is to enable a maximum number of youngsters to follow higher education by mapping the skills-needs of the young professionals, enabling retraining in the priority fields for the regional environment, and developing tailor made training at all HE levels, in particular for those sectors of the labour market which are going through a deep transformation.

- **The social dimension as an inherent part of the European Higher Education reform process**

Higher Education Institutions that have started opening up to new groups and types of learners are re-enforcing the social dimension of HE.

Increased access however also has to involve students with foreign qualifications, and from lower socio-economic income groups.

The creation of non-traditional routes is a high priority for an increasing number of HEIs, which may bring in non-traditional learners, such as mature students, who for some reason left HE and want to re-enter the system.

Lifelong learning objectives in view of increased schooling, including HE, will deliver higher returns for both individuals and societies, thus representing positive social investments

- **Innovation to stimulate regional development**

As full partners in the innovation circle in their own region institutions of professional higher education, together with other actors in the socio-economic domain, are ready to play a substantial role in preparing students for new careers on the basis of projections of society, in which the principles of sustainability, fair trade and services to the community go hand in hand with economic growth.

By interacting with the local business and public sectors higher education institutions can play a substantial role in the development of the local or regional environment.

IV. EFFORTS EXPECTED FROM GOVERNMENTS TO GIVE THE REFORM A NEW IMPETUS

▪ Open up higher education through lifelong learning

Life-long learning is part of the solution for the challenges facing a society which has to cope with an ageing population and the decline of the demographic curve. The role of life-long learning has even been accelerated by the recent economic crisis.

All learners, whatever their origin or social background should be guaranteed equitable access to higher education and therefore barriers resulting from national legislation or obstacles at the institutional level have to be removed. Entry to higher education via the creation of flexible learning routes has to be stimulated, with due recognition of prior learning and with the recognition of competences acquired in a non-formal environment, next to on the job experience. Transfer between cycles and different types of institutions, should be promoted at both government and institutional level. Such policy should integrate transition from an intermediate qualification to the first cycle where appropriate. A role of short cycle higher education as a gate for enhancement of access to higher education qualifications should be further analysed and promoted with respect for national conditions and culture.

Financial stimuli from the governments for the above learning paths will enable non-traditional learners to combine work with part time study.

▪ Make more apparent the societal role of higher education

In view of the broad societal role of higher education, it is necessary to stress the importance and the impact of training young people for the so-called soft sectors.

On the other hand, every training, also in the technological fields, must have a general education component, to assist learners in their personal development, and to enhance citizenship values.

As in a number of countries the barriers for access lie mostly at lower levels of education, mechanisms have to be put in place to ensure coherence between tertiary education and education prior to this, namely secondary and through this, primary education.

▪ Show the diversity of Higher Education

The diversity of Europe's higher education is an asset that deserves to be more actively advertised both within and outside the EHEA. A multidimensional classification of higher education in Europe, proving excellence in diverse categories would show the strengths of the entire higher education and help institutions to make better advantage of what they are offering.

For Professional Higher Education such a typology would focus on institutions showing excellence in applied research, close cooperation with the world of employment, effective involvement of all stakeholders in the governance of institutions, and in the design and offer of curriculums. Professional higher education is particularly well placed to demonstrate the value of technologically and vocationally oriented research aimed at the exercise of a profession and the knowledge obtained

hereby. Professionally oriented higher education institutions, their students, and through them the entire society would benefit if this aspect became more visible.

- **Involve the entire higher education in regional development**

The professional higher education institutions can fill the gap between fundamental research and innovation by linking universities, knowledge centres and enterprises. Too often research regulations and proceedings exclude professional higher education from the research triangle, although a vast number of institutions of professional higher education tend to have close links with enterprises. Using their full potential would help the enterprises react faster to the changes in the market. Therefore funding should be allocated on the basis of each institution's actual role in the knowledge triangle.

The present economic crisis may generate a sense of urgency, from which applied research, and through this the economy can benefit.

In order to close the gap between research and its practical applications, funding by governments should help develop mechanisms for the output-measurement of applied research.

Therefore benchmarking of applied research results must be based on relevant and appropriate criteria.

- **Stimulate mobility and the creation of joint programmes in response to global challenges**

Professional higher education institutions are already contributing to the global dimension of the Bologna Process. Through their active links with enterprises they may even help the latter to reach the global parameter. Therefore they should always be ready to innovate and to step into the role of initiator of changes.

One possibility to stimulate professional higher education in this role is through international joint curricula. This requires full recognition of the professional qualifications on a national level and the acceptance that internationalization and (professional) mobility are a standard part of all higher education programmes.

- **Advertise and Promote the Process of Reform of HE**

Whereas some stakeholders and parts of the general public may perceive the concrete realisations of Bologna as disappointing, it is important to realise that the process has been important on itself, whatever its current level of achievements. Informing the general public in the participating countries about the ongoing process should therefore also focus on this aspect.

It is at the same time a common responsibility of all stakeholders and of every partner in the process individually, to widely promote the achievements of the Bologna reform outside the EHEA, in a double objective to extend a cooperating hand to other regions in the world, while at the same time affirming our belief in the strength and attractiveness of the whole of European HE, including professional higher education.