

Recommendations from Professional Higher Education  
2015 Yerevan Ministerial Conference



**MAKING EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION  
A KEY PLAYER IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
A FASTLY AND UNPREDICTABLY CHANGING SOCIETY**

## INTRODUCTION

Being the voice of professional higher education and a consultative member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, EURASHE presents in this position paper

### **MAKING EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION A KEY PLAYER IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FASTLY AND UNPREDICTABLY CHANGING SOCIETY**

its policy priorities to the Ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference and Bologna Policy Forum, held in Yerevan (Armenia) in May 2015.

EURASHE is the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education who offer professionally-oriented programmes and are engaged in applied and market-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 science and prepares graduates for a smooth transition to the working life. This is not only a matter of teaching for a direct transition to the labour market, but teaching for sustaining employability.

EURASHE holds the view that all institutions of professional 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 the world of work and regional embedding, emphasise the key role of learning and share a broad interpretation of innovation and research aiming at practical applications and product development.

As a stakeholders’ organisation, influential in 40 countries inside and outside the EHEA, EURASHE

is engaged in diverse fields: quality assurance, qualifications framework, lifelong learning, employability, applied research, staff development and the social dimension of higher education.

EURASHE acknowledges that National Qualifications Frameworks enhance opportunities for access, transfer and progression between cycles and within different European systems, based on transparent and approved external and internal quality assurance.

The revision of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), a process in which EURASHE was actively involved, provide Bologna members with a powerful instrument for the assessment of the quality of programmes and institutions, for the recognition of learning and degrees and for student and staff mobility in general.

In the past two years EURASHE focused on the mission of professional higher education. Through a clear vision of professional higher education and its strategic consequences on the level of governance, education, research and regional embedding, professional higher education has the ambition to be highly relevant for sustainable employability, product innovation and societal change in general.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

During the 1990s fundamental worldwide changes occurred following the rise of international markets, communication and information technology in the 1980s. These can be summarised in terms of globalisation, individualisation, digitalisation and a cross-media boom. The economic and financial crisis of the 2000s has not only deepened and hastened these worldwide changes.

The new decade is characterised by serious budget cuts in all European countries and by consequence in the funding of higher education. At the same time society is tackling new challenges: unemployment, growing nationalism and extremism, new tensions between the East and the West.

Consequently, higher education institutions are experiencing the need to reformulate their institutional missions and strategies.

'Bologna', and the education reforms promoted by the European Union 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.

Though the Bologna Process is often perceived as 'mission accomplished', still many issues are to be solved at national and international level. **Therefore a new momentum for the Bologna Process is needed.**

As said, the current economic climate and social developments induce particular governments to proceed with budget cuts in (higher) education and research, which have consequences for

higher education institutions' management, programmes and curricula. Several national authorities are looking for **new models of funding**, in order to enable higher education to be more performant and more efficient. The level of funding between countries is highly different. As education is a public responsibility, the funding of higher education by national authorities is crucial in tackling the international economic competition and the battle for talent.

A large group of learners do not seem to **benefit (in terms of access, progress and graduation) according to their capacities** from the present mainly linear structure of programmes and courses. Often the lack of flexibility in many legal provisions makes it impossible to address groups of ethnic minorities or disabled students. Most of the time no specific funding is foreseen.

In the last decade the educational landscape has drastically changed: the paradigm shift from input-based to output-based education (competence-based, learning outcomes), the change from a one-to-many to a many-to-many way of learning which was the result of the implementation of distance learning in higher education, the appearance of new education providers through the Internet and last but not least the availability of the Internet, cross-media and the development of massive open online courses (MOOCs) created a totally new educational landscape and a huge change in the way of learning and in the learner's profile.

For all these changes institutions need a new staff member profile. Human resources policies in higher education are looking for new pathways to be able to confront the needs of learners, business, civil society and local communities.

Within this kaleidoscope EURASHE is ready to formulate its policy priorities to the Ministers

of the EHEA, on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference and Bologna Policy Forum, which is held in Yerevan (Armenia) in May 2015.

**EURASHE considers these priorities as key success factors for professional higher education being a key player in the development of the new society. A society in which sustainability, economic welfare and all core values of the Bologna Process can go hand in hand.**

## RESPONSE FROM PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION TO IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES FOR SOCIETY & HIGHER EDUCATION

For this Ministerial gathering we reaffirm our commitments on behalf of the diverse institutions providing professional higher education we represent. We are doing so fully aware of the challenges the institutions and programmes are facing in a period of economic and financial downturn. At the same time we maintain our firm belief in a process of restructuring of higher education which has already shown its effects, and has made steady transparent progress, though not everywhere at the same pace, nor in all fields of undergraduate and graduate education.

We believe that robust and systemic investment in (higher) education and learning is a key response not only to the current economic climate but also to the long-term challenges which our societies face.

This paper focuses on the next stage, namely the realisation of the operational objectives, and what this requires from decision-makers at the Ministerial Conference of the EHEA, taking place in Yerevan in 2015.

### Policy Recommendations

#### A. THE GROWING RELEVANCE OF PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Following two years of intensive research on the harmonisation of approaches to professional higher education in Europe, EURASHE is stressing the growing relevance of institutions of professional higher education in Europe.

Indeed research conducted in 15 countries in Europe shows that professional higher educa-

tion is a form of higher education that offers a particularly intense integration with the world of work in all its aspects, including teaching, learning, research and governance, and at all levels of the overarching qualifications framework of the EHEA.

#### We urge Ministers:

1. To allow for the development of professional higher education at all levels of the Bologna cycles in all EHEA-countries;
2. To remove all obstacles for higher education – world of work cooperation and to create a powerful legal basis for improving the collaboration at all levels between higher education and the world of work;
3. To be partner in the enhancement of employability and the competence level in their population through the development of an effective policy on the recognition of prior learning and on the approach to the lifelong learning provision.

#### In this context EURASHE commits itself:

1. To provide policy-makers with validated concepts and methodologies on the development of professional higher education, cooperation with the world of work and the employability of graduates;
2. To support institutions of professional higher education, through networking and best practices, in focussing their collaboration with the world of work and on the employability of graduates;
3. To develop a set of indicators for the quality and excellence of professional higher education in relevant fields.

## B. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REVISED ESG

Quality is one of the driving forces in higher education. Institutions of higher education consider excellence at different levels and fields as one of their main priorities at grass root level.

In EURASHE's view quality management is a strategic tool based on an implemented vision on quality of education, research and service to society that monitors institutional outcomes.

Quality management is the basic instrument to create transparency towards stakeholders and society in general. Students are, at different moments, users and co-creators of their study programme and learning activities.

In a professional higher education context quality is based on student-centred learning and is considered as outcome-based. Students are involved in a study programme focused on problem solving of complex cases of the world of work. Learning and knowledge generation are organised through relevant theoretical schemes and practice. Learning by acting, supported by relevant applicable theory and involving students in market-based research, is the strongest basis for graduates in an ever changing society. In this view transiting to the labour market needs special attention.

Student-centred learning also focuses on quality education for minority groups or disabled students at different stages of the study programme.

The revised ESG proposed for the Ministers' approval provide institutions with a modern format for quality management in line with their profile and strategy. It allows institutions offering professional higher education to work with standard and guidelines congruent with their profile oriented to the world of work and the development

of sustainable employability of their graduates.

### **We urge Ministers:**

1. To adopt the revised ESG and consider the consequences for relevant professional higher education;
2. To implement the revised ESG in their respective countries, especially in terms of professional higher education focused on outcome-based student-centred learning;
3. To give financial incentives to those institutions focusing on a strong professional higher education profile, on lifelong learning and on the inclusion of minority groups.

### **In this context EURASHE commits itself:**

1. To disseminate actively the revised ESG among institutions offering professional higher education;
2. To develop methodologies based on the revised ESG to support and develop the use of a quality culture and quality management as strategic tools for institutional excellence;
3. To contribute to the transparency of professional higher education on the basis of the revised ESG;
4. To report on the challenges in the implementation of the ESG and formulate recommendations to Ministers in order to give the ESG an added value in different fields of higher education;
5. To develop interfaces between different levels of the European/National Qualifications Frameworks and higher vocational education and training on the basis of the revised ESG;
6. To develop methodologies to include student-centred learning in higher education on the basis of the revised ESG.

## C. SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYABILITY AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Employability is more than finding a job, it has a transiting and a sustainable aspect.

Employability means that higher education and lifelong learning provide society with graduates able to combine discipline-specific knowledge with problem-solving capacities in the broadest sense.

Graduates are open-minded, and know how to deal with knowledge explosion and technical developments. They are creative and innovative.

Employability is the basis for social participation as adults in society, it is built on the development of capacities, a developed educational system, a focused labour market policy and the involvement of the world of work and society in higher education.

From this perspective the recognition of any form of prior learning is a crucial factor in the employability issue.

### **We urge Ministers:**

1. To further develop a high quality higher education focused on the learning individual, meeting the needs of the world of work and using the achieved learning outcomes for further education and lifelong learning. Structures and regulations may not prevent people from learning, progressing and further developing;
2. To take the necessary measures for the recognition of any form of prior learning. Crucial in this is systematising the recognition mechanisms in higher education, as its implementation varies between fields and levels;
3. To stimulate all stakeholders to participate

in the development of higher education and learning: world of work, civil society and (local) authorities;

4. To develop a performant system of higher education focused on the enhancement of the competence level of all learners, that guides students in their development by higher education, prevents drop-out, with the best return on investment possible.

### **In this context EURASHE commits itself:**

1. To develop the concept of employability through research, implementation strategies and methods, and to work on capacity building in institutions;
2. To develop and promote modes of educational provision adapting educational structures and programmes to the learner through networking, dialogue and projects in which all stakeholders of higher education are involved;
3. To support institutions in the development of educational staff dealing with the challenge of employability of graduates. To involve staff in the collaboration with the world of work or directly in the world of work, giving them the experience of what problem solving and innovation means in a real work setting;
4. To support methods of work-based learning and authentic learning situations in which learners are active partners and not education consumers;
5. To take the lead in the EHEA in the development of concepts, formats and methodologies in the field of the recognition of prior learning, if the necessary support is provided.

## D. OPEN MOBILITY AND RECOGNITION

Recognition is high on the agenda of the EHEA. It is one of the crucial conditions for mobility of individuals and knowledge in Europe. It can offer the opportunity to correct the skills mismatch in a number of regions. It is also the basis for the enhancement of the competence level all over Europe. It is the key for success in lifelong learning.

For many reasons the recognition agenda is also one of the most difficult issues in the development of a real open EHEA.

Although the Lisbon Recognition Convention provided the EHEA with the appropriate framework for a recognition policy, the recognition of degrees and of prior learning is still an issue, even at bilateral or regional level in Europe.

The sense of urgency in this field is more than ever present.

### **We urge Ministers:**

1. To put the recognition of degrees and of prior learning high on the agenda of the Bologna Process in the coming period;
2. To take legislative initiatives for the automatic recognition of degrees based on transparency created by the implementation of all the Bologna tools;
3. To take legislative initiatives to ensure the recognition of prior formal and non-formal learning;
4. To accept new ECTS Users' Guide, which has been revised to strengthen the "meaningful implementation of learning outcomes" in the EHEA.

### **In this context EURASHE commits itself:**

1. To take the lead in the development of recommendations on the recognition of prior learning at EHEA-level, on condition of appropriate funding;
2. To support all developments for the automatic recognition of degrees;
3. To work on inter-sectorial interfaces for the recognition of prior learning in higher education;
4. To support institutions in the implementation of policies and methodologies for the recognition of prior learning.



## E. NEW MEDIA

Anywhere-Anytime Learning is developing very fast as a consequence of the new electronic layer covering society and the accessibility to the Internet and all electronic devices.

The upcoming generation can be considered as electronic natives, for whom access to the virtual world and social media is part of daily life, a confrontation with the exponential growth of information and knowledge, a reality of competing stimuli or sometimes chaos.

In this reality higher education is drastically and structurally changing, as learning itself is changing. It has become more a process of knowledge generation and knowledge construction based on theoretical frameworks as instruments for critical selection and evaluation of information and knowledge. Education is looking for a new positioning, not only in the development of new provisions but also in finding new teaching practices and in how to deal with the overwhelming stream of information. As a consequence of this evolution a number of new (private) providers and global providers appear on the higher education scene (some with blended learning, some with distance learning, some with MOOCs).

In professional higher education focused on outcome-based education, in which the translation of theory in practical application, complex problem solving in real life situations, market-based research and practical training are part of the profile and the core business of programmes and institutions, the use of new forms of electronic learning and communication needs special attention.

A number of learning outcomes cannot be achieved by electronic media, while a number of

other learning outcomes can be better achieved by electronic means.

Transparency, learning outcomes, accreditation, peer learning and support, social inclusion, cross-border education are just a few of the issues to be clarified and defined. They are the Bologna tools in a new context.

### **We urge Ministers:**

1. To support higher education institutions to acquire and implement an ICT-infrastructure for the use of new media in education and research policy and development;
2. To provide professional higher education incentives to acquire relevant educational software and to access relevant scientific databases;
3. To support institutions offering professional higher education in the development of a competence-based human resources policy for staff working in the new educational environment;
4. To develop a policy on quality management, certification and recognition for online providers of professional higher education.

### **In this context EURASHE commits itself:**

1. To review the consequences of the development of new media and formulate appropriate recommendations concerning the different tools of the Bologna Process;
2. To develop an evidence-based educational model for professional higher education in the new teaching and learning context;
3. To define the criteria for excellence in teaching in professional higher education in the new learning context.

## F. RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION (RDI)

Research, development and innovation is an integrated part of a sustainable professional higher education in which the RDI agenda is informed by the world of work in order to meet the needs of society and of the world of work.

Researchers seek input from stakeholders' requests, collaboration and contributions. The RDI-process respects the nature of these inputs and can include various types of research activities and scholarship.

RDI-outcomes aim to be relevant to the world of work and society. In addition to traditional outputs, outputs are solution-oriented for the world of work and society.

The specific approach of professional higher education in RDI, and the involvement of students in it, contribute to the employability and the learn-to-learn capacity of graduates.

The RDI-approach in professional higher education can be considered as one of the major factors in the social and economic development of SMEs, companies and society.

### **We urge Ministers:**

1. To recognise research, development and innovation in professional higher education as an integral part of its profiled educational process, its relevance for the world of work, product innovation and society in general;
2. To give professional higher education a structural access to funding for its research, development and innovation activities;
3. To develop a set of research outcome indicators in line with the research, development and innovation paradigms used in professional higher education.

### **In this context EURASHE commits itself:**

1. To develop models of collaboration with the world of work in research, development and innovation and to support institutions implementing the professional higher education approach;
2. To focus on innovation capacity in institutional development;
3. To develop a methodology for staff development and talent management oriented to innovative capacity;
4. To define research and innovation competences as developed in professional higher education, critical to the development of employability and entrepreneurship in graduates.

## CONCLUSIONS

Europe is facing historic challenges.

Besides the difficult economic climate, Europe is confronted with the strong economic development of other regions in the world.

The global economic competitive context changed in 20 years' time as never before.

The only way to tackle these challenges is by promoting human capital, developing the knowledge society, and striving for innovation, responsibility and entrepreneurship.

The role and the involvement of higher education in this ongoing process is critical for the development of economies and societies.

Institutions of higher education face these developments in a context of budget cuts and a battle for talent.

Changes in the composition of the learner populations in culture, age, gender, and the strategic objective to raise the participation and graduation rates to a much higher percentage makes the operating context for institutions and especially for staff members completely different.

The strong resurgence of nationalism and extremism can be faced with the fundamental European values of diversity, solidarity and tolerance. Higher education is a place for debate and the development of democratic attitudes and dignity. It is the place par excellence to foster humanism as the basis for a society based on trust and responsibility.

The virtual world has put a new layer over society. Due to the new means of communication, of knowledge production and dissemination, and disclosure of data, learning has become different, and research and innovation go faster than ever.

Complex and unpredictable changes make the need for transversal competences in graduates more than ever necessary.

With this new world perspective, higher education and the EHEA need a new momentum. Professional higher education is ready to take its responsibility in the making of this new society.

Joined efforts between authorities, the world of work and the institutions offering professional higher education can help us cope with all these challenges.

*In line with Darwin we can state that the most adaptive will survive in this new context.*



EURASHE is the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education that offer professionally-orientated programmes and are engaged in applied and profession-related research within the Bologna cycles. Members of EURASHE are national associations of higher education institutions and individual institutions, such as universities, (university) colleges and universities of applied sciences, as well as other professional associations and stakeholder organisations active in the field of higher education. EURASHE members operate within and across different national systems whether these are unitary or binary, professional and/or academic. EURASHE was founded in Patras (Greece) in 1990. It has the status of an international non-profit association according to Belgian law (aisbl) and its Secretariat is located in Brussels (Belgium).

EURASHE's mission is to represent the views of professionally-orientated institutions and programmes in the higher education systems in countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), either in binary higher education systems or in unitary 'university' systems.

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