

Entering a decade of flexibility and diversity: a new momentum for professional higher education

EURASHE's statement for the European Higher Education Area ministers' conference in Rome 2020

NEW WORLD: NEW LEARNING PATHWAYS, MODELS AND PARTNERSHIPS

With the Rome conference, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is entering a new decade, one which will rethink the existing patterns in higher education, bring new impulses based on societal, economic, technological, but also climate and demographic changes. Professional higher education, which is characterised by strong links to the world of work in all aspects from policy and governance to learning, research and innovation, has greatly benefitted over the past decades from its engagement in the Bologna process as it has promoted the diversity of higher education and its need to address the needs of various target groups. The focus on quality, employability and life-long learning corresponded well with the development of professional higher education.

The current pandemic has sped up the advent of digital, flexible and personalised learning, widening a range of pathways to address future skills. There is no single model for such development, yet we agree that in order to better address the wide variety of societal, learning and scientific challenges, institutions will need to be more open, to remove all barriers to cooperation and strategic partnerships.

EURASHE shares the belief that the future EHEA should be built upon the following key principles:

- 1. Academic freedom and the necessity of institutional autonomy with close links to stakeholders.** Higher education institutions should enjoy sufficient space and flexibility in their strategic decisions, basing them on close consultation with representatives of the world of work, students and relevant communities. The EHEA should take clear and prompt action whenever a breach or deficiency in such principles threatens the capacity of higher education to communicate with and respond to society.
- 2. Key tools and principles for transparency, quality and recognition.** EURASHE has supported those struggling with the implementation of key commitments through its involvement in peer learning exercises. Now we are calling for a stronger engagement of institution leaders, students and all stakeholders at the European level as well as in national discussions to achieve definite progress in the joint creation of the EHEA. We see the engagement of stakeholders and the attention paid to their expectations as one of great benefits of EHEA.
- 3. Promoting inclusiveness and diversity.** EURASHE calls for the recognition of a greater diversity of institutional missions and provision. This will allow higher education to accommodate a steadily growing variety of learners of differing ages, social groups, experience and qualification levels. These missions will also accommodate a variety of research and innovation projects in regional and national ecosystems just as various institutions' strategic partnerships will bring synergies to make better use of their capacity in meeting these objectives.

PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION AIMS AT TRANSFORMING SOCIETY

Universities of Applied Sciences and professional higher education in Europe support the renewal of the social pact through the following engagement:

1. **The enhanced dialogue between key stakeholders** and academic experts to respond to future skills and learning pathways through:
 - policies supporting models allowing strong, yet balanced engagement with the world of work in all higher education activities from governance to learning, research and innovation;
 - initiatives supporting the importance of giving opportunities to all to access the various modes of higher education, flexible learning for a wider range of generations, including those seeking new or enhanced qualifications;
 - policies opening up institutional partnerships with other learning and research providers while assuring the quality, relevance and reasonable funding

Learning from the European Universities Initiative will be a source of a valuable inspiration for partnership and cooperation models at European and regional levels, and for the harmonisation of higher education policies at European level. EURASHE stresses that further discussion should also involve other educational sectors like vocational education and training. Issues related to recognition, quality and funding will equally come to the fore.

2. The **flexible learning pathways within a new vision for the concept of life-long learning** which identifies and accommodates a variety of learning needs for professional or personal development. This includes:
 - **Micro-credentials**, which EURASHE sees as a great opportunity to enrich the existing set of learning opportunities for various groups of learners. The coming years should lead to the clarification of the concept, its recognition, quality and funding.
 - **Short-cycle higher education**. EURASHE calls for the support at European level, of an in-depth analysis of the current development of short cycle higher education and of its links with other qualifications. EURASHE is ready to contribute to such work to share and support its findings.
 - **Work-based learning focusing on Smart and Future Skills**, for which EURASHE has developed the quality principles and supporting tools. We will further promote this effective mode of learning and appeal for a stronger engagement with the world of work, especially with small and medium size enterprises, to raise awareness of the benefits of apprenticeships in higher education. We encourage governments to take strategic action and fund work-based learning schemes. At European level, we advocate for the support of the concept within the Skills agenda, the promotion of relevant tools, experience sharing and the university-business dialogue.
 - **Recognition of prior experience**. EURASHE sees it as a crucial instrument moving towards more flexibility. It needs determined support, guidelines and resources. EURASHE is ready to contribute to its development and support of institutional capacity building.

3. **Digitalisation** plays a key role in opening new solutions in learning, mobility and governance. Higher education has to reflect on the growing role of digital skills across all human activity by providing flexible provision for the delivery of curricula. Providing enabling infrastructures and supporting digital transformation should be an integral part of national higher education strategies, based on a dialogue

with all stakeholders including students, teachers and support staff. EURASHE considers the digitalisation agenda to be among our key priorities for the coming years and will support its members in advancing on the issue. Digitalisation strategies should take into account the following issues:

- **Inclusiveness & Diversity:** Online learning should aim at closing existing socio-economic gaps, not creating new ones. Online education should be accessible to everyone, whatever their profile or background. We believe teachers should be equipped with the right digital competences for the delivery of quality digital learning and empowered to work digitally in a confident manner.
- **Quality.** Higher education institutions are now devising a long-term approach to digital education and training. Online education should equip students to face the challenges that are ahead of them to prosper in a society that is increasingly unreliable. A longer-term approach to a quality-based digital education should therefore be defined.
- **Cooperation.** The pandemic has shown that digital education could be used as a momentum to share and exchange best practices in online teaching and learning. Higher education institutions will benefit from enhanced strategic partnerships by sharing their expertise, resources and capacities at national and European levels.

4. **Regional engagement and serving the needs of regional innovation ecosystems** falls within the mission of professional higher education, specifically that of *universities of applied sciences*, which can contribute to the recovery of regional economies hit by the recent recession. It is their remit of acting as regional hubs to connect regional stakeholders to academic expertise. EURASHE has mapped the wide range of activities of universities of applied sciences within regional ecosystems: they involve life-long learning, social and business services and product innovation. We therefore advocate a stronger integration of professional higher education in regional smart specialisation strategies and are committed to further develop policies and tools for the regional engagement agenda and its promotion.

5. **Closer links between learning and research** will make it possible to renew the existing patterns of learning in order to address future skills through multi-disciplinarity and the adequate engagement of students in research activities, from short cycle higher education to necessary development of Professional doctorates. Support of research activities will allow professional higher education to build upon its strong links with the world of work and reflect them in applied, user-inspired research and innovation.

The coming decade opens with a great number of challenges and opportunities. EURASHE thinks they can't be dealt with at national level only: they call for joint European solutions and require the ever-stronger internationalisation of higher education. EURASHE is ready to join forces with European institutions, governments and other stakeholders in these efforts.

EURASHE is the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education that offer professionally oriented programmes and are engaged in applied research within the Bologna cycles. EURASHE represents universities of applied sciences (UAS) and university colleges; members of EURASHE are national and sectorial associations of higher education institutions, and other individual institutions, such as universities. EURASHE is highly committed to the Bologna Process taking part in the Bologna Follow-Up Group and its Board, Bologna Coordination Implementation group and all three thematic peer group, co-chairing the advisory groups on learning and teaching.