

EURASHE POSITION PAPER ON PERMEABILITY BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING:

Making the learners' journey possible

EURASHE is the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education that offer professionally orientated programmes and are engaged in applied research within the Bologna cycles. EURASHE represents universities of applied sciences and university colleges; other members of EURASHE are national and sectorial associations of higher education institutions, and other individual institutions, such as universities.

Europe is facing various socio-economic challenges including youth unemployment, discrepancy of qualifications with labour market requirements, social tensions and changes brought on by technological developments and by the digitalisation agenda. The solutions lie in the promotion of a wider concept of employability, in flexibility, relevance and openness of education systems where learners can enter, leave and combine their own learning opportunities to build, update and refresh their profile and qualification.

Professional higher education (PHE) is in a unique position to contribute to such developments thanks to its values, principles and approaches to learning and a development that focuses on an intense interaction with the world of work and other stakeholders. EURASHE actively promotes the employability of graduates based on relevant scientific knowledge, transversal skills, practical experience and the flexibility of provisions. Learners are encouraged to develop themselves through capacity building and to reflect on their needs and potential for further personal and professional development within the entire higher education area and through life-long learning provisions.

EURASHE would therefore like to promote further discussion on the permeability concept as a more holistic model, promoting strengthened links between different parts of education systems and among the various European educational systems. We approach the concept of permeability from the learner's perspective. That concept allows learners to move easily between different types of education programmes and modules horizontally (within one and the same EQF¹ level) with respect for their character and objectives, as well as vertically (upwards and downwards between the different EQF levels), as they decide which are to be the most suitable for themselves. EURASHE is convinced that such a concept of permeability looks upon a learner as an autonomous and accountable partner, finding his/her own relevant lifelong learning path for employability, personal development, development of cultural identity and civic values.

This means creating widened opportunities for learners to create their own Learning Journey.

¹ EQF – European Qualifications Framework, <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/content/descriptors-page>

SCOPE

The introduction of these flexible systems must take into account the existing similarities and differences between various parts of education systems. While the generic mission of personal and professional development, as well as some basic overarching values and principles are the same for both higher education and vocational education and training (VET), there are still differences in focus and tools adopted. Both systems offer education programmes at different EQF levels, while their providers operate in quite different European and national contexts.

Generally, VET easily adjusts to the labour market with the objective of a fairly immediate employment of its graduates. According to the ISCED framework, VET is defined as an educational programme designed for learners to acquire knowledge, skills and competences specific for a particular occupation or trade or class of occupations or trades, the successful completion of which leads to labour market-relevant vocational qualifications. PHE focuses on long-term employability which means both cooperating with and shaping the world of work, yet reflecting also the academic and civic aspects of education. Due to its threefold mission of education, research and service to society, in combination with academic freedom, PHE is particularly well-equipped to support, strengthen and develop graduates' skills that respond appropriately to present and future needs of the labour market.

Higher education has been further developing under the Bologna Process, in the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and has adopted its related tools (e.g. ESG², ECTS³), whereas vocational education and training (VET) operates within the Copenhagen Process and has instruments of its own (e.g. EQAVET⁴, ECVET⁵). Higher education providers are the owners of the educational process and this means institutional autonomy, academic freedom and accountability, while in VET the educational process and its outcomes are strongly driven by social partners.

A lot of European countries have aligned their various levels of Higher Education and VET against the EQF. The 2015 Ministerial Conference of the EHEA (Yerevan, May 2015) recommended to include EQF level 5, organised as short-cycle higher education (SCHE), as an integral part of the EHEA. The development of the Short Cycle Higher Education at level 5 is the moment par excellence to develop interfaces and permeability tools between Higher Education (especially its professionally oriented part) and VET. In this context the permeability between the two systems is even more relevant and new opportunities arise to develop the learners' Learning Journeys across systems and levels. These opportunities are vital in times of economic instability and high unemployment in order to promote the learners' professional capacity and personal development.

As the representative of PHE, EURASHE's mission is to identify, develop and promote learning pathways that include a particularly intense integration with the world of work in all areas of higher education,

² ESG – Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, <https://www.eurashe.eu/policy/quality-he/esg/>

³ ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, http://ec.europa.eu/education/resources/european-credit-transfer-accumulation-system_en

⁴ EQAVET – European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training, <http://www.eqavet.eu/>

⁵ ECVET – The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/ecvet_en

including teaching, learning, research and governance, and this at all levels of the overarching qualifications framework of the EHEA.

BARRIERS

The main obstacles to enhancing the permeability between PHE and VET are:

- Low accessibility of programmes of PHE for the different target groups;
- Underdeveloped permeability tools and provisions such as introductory courses, bridging programmes and digital learning;
- Underdeveloped sphere of recognition of prior learning (RPL);
- Use of different approaches to quality assurance and accreditation;
- Lack of mutual understanding and trust between employers, providers, levels, sectors.

The following barriers (pose a challenge which) leads to low permeability between PHE and VET:

- Positional and situational barriers which are a direct consequence of one's life circumstances (e.g. the socio-economic and socio-cultural background of the learner, the combination of family life, work and education for adult learners);
- Barriers at a system level due to provisions, legislation or policies (e.g. the organisation of more tailor-made programmes or pathways are more costly for providers);
- Institutional barriers due to a lack of mutual trust (e.g. the lack of common dialogue between PHE, VET and the world of work, a tension caused by a fear of losing identity or position);
- Stakeholders' barriers (e.g. a potential lack of promotion of education and training by the world of work, fear of brain drain, fear of extra expenses, fear of loss of human capital);
- Barriers to using available tools (e.g. when appropriate tools are not used fully).

SOLUTIONS

EURASHE therefore proposes the following solutions to enhance the permeability between PHE and VET:

- Cross-sectorial policies will break down positional and situational barriers for lifelong learning and PHE;
- Financial support is required for addressing policy, strategy and responses by using tailor-made solutions and tools at institutional level towards learners' needs;
- Building networks and stimulating communication in respect to the identity of all involved partners is crucial. Mutual trust between all actors is the cornerstone of the permeability between PHE and VET and must be based on mutually acceptable quality principles and systemised and transparent processes;
- Existing European-level tools should be made more user-friendly, transparent, evidence-based and should promote trust. Integrating the existing tools is a long-term project, the discussion of which should be initiated now.

COMMITMENTS

In order to stimulate the permeability between PHE and VET as described above, EURASHE:

- **Strongly supports the principle of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.** EURASHE wants to endorse and promote the concept that development and implementation of concrete policy and strategy is the responsibility of PHE providers. PHE providers are accountable for the quality of their services. Only this way can PHE accommodate learners in finding their own pathway to realise their individual Learning Journey. From the learners' perspective, it is a real opportunity to be able to choose between PHE and VET programmes and courses with their respective cultures, identities and missions.
- Encourages PHE providers to pay constant attention to a proper balance **between the demands of the world of work and their own autonomy.** The learning outcomes of PHE programmes contribute to graduates' long-term employability, personal development and democratic participation. This broad setup is the specific contribution of PHE to the creation of an educational space in which every learner can find a way to create his/her own individual Learning Journey.
- **Promotes the innovative power of education towards the world of work.** PHE programmes can not only be labour market-driven in a utilitarian vision. Setting trends for new professions, new forms of entrepreneurship and new types of SMEs are equally important. The threefold mission of education, research and service to society guarantees that PHE is equipped to support, strengthen and develop the future development of the world of work. It is part of the mission of PHE to guide learners in finding their own pathway in the future world of work by creating opportunities for tailor-made individual Learning Journeys.

In this context EURASHE commits to:

- Joining, promoting and facilitating the discussion between PHE and VET providers, the world of work, policy-makers and students;
- Promoting the permeability between PHE and VET in joint discussions with the world of work, in private, public and non-governmental sectors;
- Promoting the permeability between PHE and VET within higher education policy discussions together with other interested partners and networks;
- Exploring further, together with relevant partners, the potential of all education provisions at EQF level 5, its integration within higher education while not neglecting the developments and mutual links at this and other EQF levels within VET and HE;
- Promoting the full use of existing tools, and initiating activities for their better understanding and development;
- Supporting equipping lecturers with the skills needed for the most effective use of modern and relevant learning approaches and technologies, and for the enhancement of personalised learning.

Adopted by the EURASHE General Assembly in Le Havre, France, March 29, 2017