

Modernisation of Higher Education as part of the ET 2020 Agenda of the European Commission

EURASHE position paper

Introduction

Higher education in Europe is in continuous evolution, following the developments of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Union (EU) higher education policies.

In the last few years, the mission of higher education had to adapt to a changing and challenging context:

1. The impact, including in the field of higher education, of the development of competing economies at global level;
2. Efforts at European level to overcome a long-lasting economic crisis and financial difficulties;
3. The shift to a knowledge society with the explosion of knowledge, and the related issues of access to and management of knowledge;
4. The digital and virtual space as a new layer over human communication and cooperation;
5. The far reaching future of technological innovation and its impact on higher education and society;
6. Demographic changes, migrations and the growing multicultural diversity as a major phenomenon, with a stream of thousands of refugees being the most visible and tangible aspect;
7. The need for sustainability: global climate change, commitment to human values and dignity as the basis for a European common ground; the importance of personal development as the key to the quality of life;
8. New requirements for teaching staff confronted with new and complex challenges;

Such developments and challenges, although not exhaustive, need to be tackled, and higher education has a key role to play in doing so.

The main challenge for higher education will be more than ever to be relevant, as stated in the EURASHE recommendations to the Ministerial Conference of May 2015 in Yerevan, Armenia.

If higher education aspires to be a significant actor in addressing modern challenges, its relevance is crucial. **Higher education relevance is the compass on the road towards sustainability.**

The HAPHE¹ (Harmonising Approaches to Professional Higher Education in Europe) publication states:

"Professional Higher Education 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.

"Its function is to diversify learning opportunities, enhance the employability of graduates, offer qualifications and stimulate innovation for the benefit of learners and society".

Professional higher education is open to and interacts with society. It is education in context.

The European Commission organised a consultation on the Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education in Europe. EURASHE, as one of the main stakeholders in higher education at the European level, took part in the consultation through its membership.

¹ EURASHE-led project on the mission and profile of professional higher education

This position paper reports on the consultation exercise. It focuses on cross-validating the guiding principles for policy and action within the ET 2020 Agenda and updating the EURASHE framework of professional higher education relevance with the ET 2020 Agenda, resulting in a number of statements and recommendations.

1. Raising the number of higher education graduates (in line with the 40% target) through widening access and reducing drop-out

Too many people drop out of their higher education studies without finishing and too few learners get appropriate access because of the educational legislation, institutional policies, wrong choice of a study programme, sectorial siloing, etc.

Even social, employment policies or labour market policies are sometimes in conflict with educational strategies.

The consultation among EURASHE members on a renewed Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education in the European Union reveals that:

- There is strong agreement on the need for more people with higher education than is currently the case and a lower drop-out rate in higher education;
- Opinions are divided as to whether prospective students are well supported to make informed choices about what to study, whether there is a good cooperation between higher education and secondary schools in the area of study and career guidance, whether more graduates in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics are needed or whether more students should study professionally oriented courses with a direct link to a particular profession;
- There is large consensus on the fact that people with talent and interest can go into higher education irrespective of their own financial resources.

This consultation shows the quite diverse views of actors on educational efficiency.

Member states will be the key players to raise the competence and graduation level in their country in the coming years.

The creation of opportunities through effective access to higher education, retention management through (cross-) sectorial and flexible learning paths, cooperation with secondary education, inclusive pedagogy, Anywhere-Anytime Learning in the digital era, effective student support and the focus on employability are some of the elements of a global strategy. The ET2020 Agenda provides member states and institutions with a common inspiration to develop coordinated policies in this field.

EURASHE's position:

Based on the ET 2020 Agenda, a clear **educational efficiency model** should be developed.

This model on the role and interaction of the different critical factors for educational success could be the basis for a European strategy, national and regional contextualisation, policy and institutional strategies and their implementation.

2. Enhancing quality and relevance of learning and teaching

Relevance means to be connected with the matter at hand. EURASHE has always been at the frontline as far as **employability of graduates and university-business cooperation is concerned**.

In the EURASHE recommendations to the Yerevan Ministerial Conference, fast and unpredictable change is considered as the most intriguing evolution of today. Literacy in the use of new media and ICT is essential to cope with the overwhelming stream of knowledge and information.

Europe had to increasingly deal with change management. The Eurozone crisis was followed by the refugee crisis, the debate on Schengen, the debate on European values and the future of Europe in general – all this in a global context of economic competition and uncertainty. Education teaches adaptability to new evolutions as the basis for employability and a sustainable society.

In this context, the role of higher education is proactive, shaping the future, looking forward while considering the lessons learned from the past.

The consultation among EURASHE members shows that:

- Good teaching is not rewarded in an adequate way yet and teaching staff needs training to teach well. While EURASHE members consider the availability of well-balanced range of academic and professionally oriented study programmes as satisfying, they are very critical, not to say negative, about the lack of opportunities that students have in order to gain relevant work-related experience while studying and about the insufficiently developed cooperation with employers in the design and delivery of courses;
- EURASHE members have varying opinions on the high quality of teaching, the effective use of technology to improve teaching and learning and the regularly embedding of state-of-the-art research results into higher education courses;
- Opinions differ as well when it comes to the preparation of students for the future.

EURASHE's position:

- Teaching needs attention and priority from all levels: institutional, national and European. Good teaching should be rewarded adequately. Support and training of teaching staff is essential, as well as the use of new technologies to improve teaching and learning;
- The preparation of students for future needs more focus, and a clear vision on what these needs are is required;
- The cooperation with business and the world of work is often considered as ad-hoc. An overall policy is needed, including incentives of all kinds (e.g. tax shelter) for structural cooperation and interfaces in course design and delivery. The empowerment of teaching staff is vital;
- A few significant aspects were not included in the questionnaire and the ET 2020 Agenda. For instance, the impact of the arrival of thousands of refugees in Europe and the use of new media in education are new topics for relevant higher education.

3. Promoting cross-border cooperation and mobility

Over the last decades, there has been a clear trend towards growing internationalisation in higher education and more national strategies for internationalisation. In Europe, the internationalisation process began with the Erasmus Programme of the European Commission and was further reinforced by the Bologna Process. It is now considered as essential for the further development of higher education.

EURASHE members are of the opinion that internationalisation is an asset. They consider that the presence of foreign students is positive for higher education courses and that more students and staff should be involved in international cooperation. They also think that recognition of qualifications from

abroad does not work well. Recognition of diplomas, qualifications and of prior learning needs attention and more efficiency.

EURASHE's position:

- Overall attention to the automatic recognition of foreign qualifications needs to be high on the agenda;
- Support is needed for different modes of mobility as a part of international cooperation;
- More students and staff should be involved in international cooperation in Europe and beyond.

4. Strengthening the knowledge triangle

There can be no higher education without research. The loop between education, research and innovation is the key to further development in society. Closing the loop of research and innovation goes through effective funding and the link with education.

EURASHE members consider that researchers, including doctoral candidates, are recognised as professional members of staff. They have different opinions on the question whether researchers receive sufficient and appropriate support to reach their potential, as well as on the extent to which the value of interdisciplinary research is appropriately rewarded and recognised and whether higher education institutions play a strong role in contributing to innovation at regional and national level.

EURASHE members believe that there is urgent need for a structured and developed cooperation between higher education institutions and businesses in applied research and innovation.

EURASHE's position:

- As far as professional higher education is concerned, the cooperation between research and the world of work needs recognition and funding;
- The relationship between education and research provides graduates with state-of-the-art knowledge and research competences that are an essential element of employability;
- Research informed by and done in cooperation with business ensures the strongest return on investment;
- Considering their strong relationship with the world of work, professional higher education institutions are the most appropriate partners for the development of small and medium-sized enterprises and regional development.

5. Effective governance and funding mechanisms for higher education

One could state that budget cuts coupled with the development of new features in higher education (such as quality management, internationalisation, inclusion, regional involvement, and digital learning) have been the major changes in the operational context of higher education institutions over the last years. Expectations grow while financial resources decrease.

EURASHE members consider that:

- The insufficient funding received by higher education institutions to fulfil their missions effectively is the major issue;
- Higher education institutions should have more freedom to make decisions about their strategy and activities.

Views among members are different as to whether the way research and teaching are funded rewards quality.

EURASHE's position:

- The level of funding of higher education is problematic in some countries, certainly taking new responsibilities into consideration;
- Institutional autonomy is important to develop a relevant strategy in context;
- Accountability of institutions is the natural counterpart of autonomy for the quality of their provision and quality assurance.

Conclusion

Through the results of this survey among EURASHE's membership, the ET 2020 Agenda proves to be sustainable. Even in a dynamic context, the priorities defined are still valid, robust and adaptable to change.

As far as EURASHE is concerned, the following elements are emerging within the ET 2020 Agenda:

- Relevance of education, defined as education in context, is part of quality;
- Cooperation at all levels with the world of work needs further development with a more structured approach and policy;
- Demographic changes are the most fundamental change in society since many years. Overcoming this is the main challenge for Europe;
- The digital space will not only be an important element in the development of learning paradigms but also of inclusion;
- Taking into consideration budget cuts, new business models for higher education are to be developed.