



Introduction to the theme Professional Higher Education

What is meant by professional higher education (PHE) ?

The term professional higher education cannot easily be defined. Rather it is a *'passe-partout'* word for educational programs and trainings that exist under different education structures in most European countries. However, at present, there is no sharp, generally acknowledged definition of PHE, and one shall not expect that such definition will appear soon.

The only justification for such a term may then be that throughout Europe there are institutions and programs that profess themselves as profession-oriented, or want to be styled as such. This because they recognize themselves in a number of features or indicators that are linked to the predicate 'professional'.

From the above-mentioned absence of any categorization we may conclude that PHE is just part of higher education and therefore operates within the same triangle of education, knowledge creation (research) and services to the community. Another advantage of this approach is that it is possible to define professional higher education without referring to historical levels and (national) (H)E structures, and even not to certain types of institutions and ways of learning. Professional HE can occur in all kinds of institutions in the broad spectrum of academic, professional and vocational strands, in the same way as it can be offered in several modes of learning (including the traditional ones), such as contact learning, distance learning, blended learning as well as formal and non-formal learning.

Identifying academic institutions with 'highly theoretical courses' and professionally oriented institutions and programs with 'practical skills development or training' means to disregard the fact that the comprehensive universities have offered and continue to offer vocational trainings such as for prospective physicians, dentists, veterinary surgeons and architects, which are all 'professionals' in their own right.

Past and present evolutions and trends that influence the current debate on PHE

In past decades, we could witness various convergent and divergent processes in higher education, which have had an influence on what is perceived as professional versus academic higher education. On the one hand, an "academic drift" pushed "many non-academic" institutions to profile themselves as (near) equivalents to the traditional universities, often quite successfully (e.g. as was the case in Germany with the Fachhochschulen).



This because governments and also society tended to consider the ‘non-university sector’ (a common name in the early days of the E.U sponsored programs) as being second-class entities in the world of higher education, next to the research universities.

On the other hand, the explosion of the technological and commercial sectors dating back to as far as the nineteen seventies, in combination with a rise of income for middle class families, led to a steep rise of student numbers, which were (to be) trained in the newly established polytechnic-type of institutions (especially in Western European countries). Some of them developed into new (‘red-brick’) universities, after gaining their autonomy from local authorities (as was the case in e.g. the United Kingdom).

Soon a rationale for such type of institutions was then developed, in both government and employer’s circles, which was based on the ‘employability’ factor, namely that a training which also puts an emphasis on skills) is a guarantee of prospective careers in a well-defined job. This rationale has been upheld till recent times, only to be shattered by the recent economic and financial crisis.

Academic programs would reluctantly in the beginning and then increasingly in the last decades adopt this reasoning, which meant that a “vocational drift” became apparent in a large number of research universities. The National Qualification Frameworks that have been developed the past few years have strengthened this process, and even highly academic programs felt compelled to include practical elements into curricula, and in the formulation of learning outcomes.

The above meant that the boundaries between originally purely academic trainings (in some disciplines at least) and the original professional ones became blurred.

From the viewpoint of the PHE sector, there is always a ‘general’ education content in professionally oriented programs, as it is precisely this component that makes them belong to ‘higher education’. The shift of paradigm to learning outcomes-based programs, with the right combination of technical or vocational and more general humanistic skills has only strengthened the concept and perception that professional higher education is just a ‘variety’ of higher education.

A second factor of influence’ is the nature and status of the provider. With ‘nature’ is meant the profile of the institution based on its mission, whereas the ‘status’ refers to the organizing authority or awarding body (public institution, privately owned or a blend of this).

Professional higher education programs are found in a variety of settings, which can be (and mostly is) an individual institution providing professionally oriented programs. Other contexts



exist where they are affiliated to or integrated into a 'comprehensive institution', which offers vocational programs next to academic ones.

The discussion on the situation of 'Level 5' of the EQF in the different national qualifications frameworks is essential as it is in some countries the interface between vocational and higher education.

At present, different concepts of higher education institutions co-exist now also in the academic range of institutions (from the post-Humboldtian "ivory tower" to the "entrepreneurial university"), and now also 'dual learning' institutions as they came into existence in some of the federal German states, on the model of the long-established vocational trainings.

The so-called 'dual universities', with sometimes mixed 'ownership' of the management are mostly public institutions, which provide a system of shared responsibilities between the public authorities and private companies, who take care of the technical or practical aspects of the training, while paying the student a salary, who is for this part considered an employee. Such joint initiatives are rare in other countries, as they can only exist if the prevailing economic conditions of a country allow this, which is not often the case in the current economic and financial crisis.

A third important factor is the terminology, as reflected in the name of the institutions, the programmes and especially of the degrees.

For the important shift in the name of the institutions with a clear and long-standing vocational or professional orientation, as is the case with the present 'Universities of Applied Sciences' see further on.

In a number of countries the degree name is linked to the professional or academic orientation of the programs, with professional and academic bachelors respectively. Others are opposed to such a dichotomy, and prefer to call it then qualifications with a certain 'orientation'.

In many countries, the degrees "academic bachelor" and "professional bachelor", although classified at the same level of the qualifications framework (1st cycle/EQF level 6) are not fully compatible and direct continuation of second-cycle studies by "professional bachelors" is virtually impossible without 1 to 2 years of "bridging studies".

The occurrence of such a distinction (professional – academic) becomes rarer in the second cycle of the qualifications framework, and is virtually non-existent on the doctoral level. Although countries with a binary system of higher education (in the same way as it exists on the



level of secondary education, where we have the terms technical vs. general education), more often have the distinction than is the case for the countries with a unitary (university only) type of higher education.

Universities of Applied Sciences vs. University Colleges

Universities of Applied Sciences is a (relatively) new name, which is gradually substituting the original **University Colleges**, still in use in the UK and other countries that tend to copy the English example. Traditionally, University Colleges are the former Colleges, which were either mono-disciplinary and teaching advanced and specialist vocationally oriented trainings, or else multi-disciplinary colleges that had not (yet) reached university status, for several reasons: less than five faculties or disciplines, under 5000 students, no doctoral degrees, etc. Nowadays the term UC is mainly in use in the UK for HEIs which are in the above described position and feel comfortable in it, as they have established a close connection with the world of employment, for the specialist trainings they are offering.

The term Universities of Applied Sciences is a translation of the original German **Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften (HAW)**.

(Hochschulen is also the generic term in Germany for all institutions awarding academic degrees in higher education).

Since the Bologna process started **Universitäten** and **Fachhochschulen (UAS)** award legally equivalent academic Bachelor's and Master's degrees. In Germany some (of the largest) Fachhochschulen award doctoral degrees as well.

Both Switzerland and Austria used the same denomination, and the example has been followed by the Netherlands, Finland and the Baltic countries. Other countries, like Lithuania, only use the term to paraphrase their own denominations for the use of their international contacts, but never in a 'home' context, as their own legislation exclusively reserves the term 'universities' for the 'research universities'. The same for countries like Portugal (where the 'native' term is **Polytechnico**) and Ireland (where the 'native' term is **Institute of Technology**) who consider **UAS** as a suitable translation in an international context). Others like Denmark, Belgium (mainly Flanders) continue to use the term University College, as the term 'applied sciences' seems to exclude the human sciences (except for economics), and also the Schools of Arts. Croatia appears to adopt a middle-of the road solution, by choosing the term 'University Colleges of Applied Sciences'.

As there is also a lot of research (though of an applied or technological nature) done at Fachhochschulen/UAS, mainly sponsored by industry, the main difference with universities seems to



be that only the 'real universities' can award doctors degrees, though some Fachhochschulen/UAS also run doctoral programs where the degree itself is awarded by a partner university.

Conclusion

PHE is characterized by the fact that its education and certainly its study programs are shaped by specific professional goals or needs, in which the contexts of the future professions are clear and the learning outcomes are defined by the professional needs, in terms of integrated competences.

Professional Higher Education may play very an important role as an intermediary between Higher Education, VET and the labour market. In particular, PHE institutions are - in a way - "bilingual"; they speak both the academic and professional language, and can thus be key players in the process of a better understanding between higher education and the world of work.

To attain this aim, it is important to elaborate multidimensional characteristics of PHE, with adequate indicators of good practice or even excellence, and to make a comparative review of existing HE structures in European countries, identifying also problems and weak points of present systems. This is precisely one of the aims of the HAPHE project.

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Stefan Delplace