

EURASHE Working Agenda on the Bologna process

At the Plenary Meeting in June 2003 in Gyongyos, Hungary, two **EURASHE Policy Statements** were decided (see EURASHE website: <http://www.eurashe.be>). The following text is supplementary to the Policy Statements, and in more detail underlines the characteristics and actions of the sector of **Professional Higher Education** in the years to come.

The text is formed in two parts, one describing some important characteristics of the sector, and one outlining some important issues of the actual agenda for the sector.

1. Important characteristics of the sector of Professional Higher Education.

- *In most European countries the structure of higher education is a binary system, with a university sector and a sector of professional higher education including Colleges, Polytechnics and Universities of Professional Higher Education. In some countries, however, all higher education is provided by the universities in a unitary system. In dealing with issues on European higher education it important to have this diversity in mind.*
- *In several countries the largest provider of higher education, in many fields of study: economics and business, science and technology, fine and performing arts, health care, agriculture, education, and social work.*
- *In several countries responsible for a majority of the growth of student numbers in higher education in the last 20 years.*
- *Most programs situated at Bachelor level, in some study fields/countries the programs are situated at Master level, leading to Master of Professional Education or Master of Science.*
- *Large innovations are actually taking place: flexible study programs, introduction of competence based learning, access on the basis of work experience through assessments, e-learning, and increase of apprenticeship programs.*
- *Access by heterogeneous groups of students: young students with general education at intermediate or highest level, young students with a degree from vocational secondary education, students who switch from research university programs, adult and foreign students, disadvantaged groups including minorities.*
- *Close cooperation with the future employers in order to specify the objective of the studies and to carry out the study process or training.*
Some institutions have applied research programs, with special attention to their regional network function and the circulation/transfer of knowledge between small and intermediate enterprises and public institutions.
- *The funding of the institutions is generally far from sufficient, leading to a high ratio of number of students for each teaching staff member.*
- *Internationalisation is an important subject on the agenda. The sector attracts many European exchange students, a part of which from outside EU.*
- *Implementation of contemporary quality systems.*
Generally the study programs have been submitted to national quality assurance.
- *Increasing cooperation with other higher education institutions and universities.*

2. Central issues of the agenda for the sector of Professional Higher Education for the forthcoming years.

a. Widening Participation

As a consequence of the Lisbon targets set by EU and of national policy, further growth of the number of students is an important goal. The focus is placed on enlarging the number of students coming from vocational secondary education and adult students with work experience (lifelong learning). Related to this objective, the sector of professional higher education also aims to decrease the number of drop-out, especially by offering adequate assessment procedures before entering a study program, by recognition of prior learning both through formal and non-formal learning, and assessment of competences required by work experiences, flexible study programs and examinations (including Bachelor, Master and shorter higher education (TSC) programs), and efficient counselling.

At the European level special attention should be given to joint degree programs at Bachelor and/or Masters level which place emphasis on work place learning as integral part of the study program (co-operation on f.e. assessment procedures for adults with work experience, workplace learning, e-learning, development of competence based curricula etc.). Furthermore, special attention should be given to the creation of consortia constituted of institutions which have strong local missions/cooperation with enterprises (which are perhaps less international oriented, because their study programs focus to a substantial part on working students). Within these consortia benchmarks could be carried out on f.e. the quality of study programs, but also on the responsiveness of institutions to local needs of the society. The transparency has been increasing in the last years, but in many areas there is still a lack of transparency in both higher education and vocational training, and a special effort on this issue is essential.

b. Improve the Area of Applied Research

Improve the position of professional higher education in the development and practical application of knowledge in (regional) enterprises and/or public institutions (f.e. hospitals, schools).

Related to the development of independent applied research in the regional setting, the sector of professional higher education aims to improve the scientific orientation of study programs and staff. This objective also includes the participation in (European) research programs, especially programs directed towards regional knowledge transfer for small and medium sized enterprises and/or improvement of services of the public sector.

Next to their educational function the institutions of professional higher education should play a vital role in strengthening the regional and local economies. Teachers and students have direct links to local enterprises and assist in reflection on practical problems through f.e. thesis research and/or practical assignment. These networks should be encouraged to strengthen the production of applied knowledge. The EU should support co-operation of this kind on the European level through special European research projects.

A special focus should be aimed at the relation between teaching and research/applied research and the promotion of research specifically aimed at the professional competencies.

c. Increase the international recognition of Professional Higher Education

According to the Berlin Communiqué ENQA, in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, has to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, and ensure an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation. – In this context it is of crucial importance, that the sector of professional higher education is evaluated on its own terms, not on generalized standards of higher education.

Because of lack of information and understanding related to the different educational systems in Europe (f.e. unitary/binary), the sector of professional higher education face problems with the international recognition of their degrees and students. This issue has to be addressed at national, European and international level. It is of growing importance because of the increase in international student recruitment, international placement of students and the establishment of campuses in other countries.

d. Increase the funding of Professional Higher Education

Realizing the tasks above mentioned is a massive undertaking, and in general the national funding and the EU financial support of the sector is far from sufficient. Common approaches are needed to work towards improvement of the funding of higher education.

EURASHE strongly supports that higher education has to be a public good and not a commodity. This implies, that the funding of higher education is a responsibility of the public sector and should not only be dependent on tuition fees. Especially when the aim is to increase the number of students in higher education, and taking the social dimension in consideration, high tuition fees will be contradictory to this aim.

e. Networking with Universities

When the student has to decide his/her studies, the ideal would be a seamless landscape of higher education, with convenient transitions from field to field and level to level. However, at the moment this is not the picture, the students are often experiencing difficulties, if they want to combine their studies.

Networking and partnerships between universities and the sector of professional higher education could lead to convenient transitional programs between the two sectors. Other important issues in the networking with the universities should be mutual development of joint degrees and double degrees.