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Participation in the opening panel discussion and in working group 1

Abstract

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.

The challenges Europe face include youth unemployment, the employment mismatch, social tensions and changes brought on by technological developments and by the digitalisation agenda and, more recently, the refugee crisis. 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 their profile and qualification.

Professional higher education (PHE) is in a unique position to contribute to such developments thanks to its approaches to learning that focus on interaction with the world of work. What is at stake is not only the employability of graduates based on relevant scientific knowledge, transversal skills and practical experience, but also their personal and civic development.

Permeability

Thus, all learners should benefit from widened opportunities to create their own *Learning Journey*. Our key concept is permeability: understood from the learner's perspective, this concept is part of a holistic model, promoting strengthened links between different parts of national education systems as well as between the various European educational systems

The development of the Short Cycle Higher Education at level 5 allows to create interfaces and permeability tools between PHE and VET to enhance the learners' Learning Journeys across systems and levels. A case in point is the French *Licence professionnelle* (Professional Bachelor). Its intense integration with the world of work make it a pure product of PHE; it has been targeted at those learners from the VET sector who wanted more training, more education. Created in 1999, and originally designed to be a finishing diploma, it has become a means for VET graduates to access the M-level within academic HE –an interesting phenomenon of students and academics moving in non-concerted fashion to adapt to the needs of society: VET students wanting more training and academics in master programmes wanting to enroll more candidates.

Recognition

One of our greatest –and enduring challenge–remains the vexing lack of progress of RPL, for if SCHE provides solutions mostly for young students, the challenge we face call for an all-encompassing approach.

The French system launched its national RPL provisions in 1985 (completed in 2002). Its initial successes were due to a national, centralized approach, at times when institutional autonomy was allowed to take second seat to political injunction. It was viewed not as an academic issue centered on validation but as a political answer to the socially unacceptable increase in unemployment. We argue that the procedures and supporting structures implemented at the time show that academics were mostly bypassed in the organisation of RPL in French Universities.

Flexibility

More than 15 years after full RPL, we are still striving at increasing the fluidity of our systems. Solutions for greater flexibility exist but, as usual in the complex situations in which institutional autonomy collides with the will of the nation and the aspirations of the citizens, we need to devise a systemic and institutional approach. At systemic level, let's work on the automatic recognition of diplomas, let's link funding to flexibility, while at institutional level, let's engage in wide-scale capacity building of all staff to enable universities to liberate their imagination and respond to the needs of their

students. The advances of digitalisation are terrifying to many a rector: let's use cloud technologies for learning and teaching to simplify student information, graduate documentation and tracking.

Will the resulting diversity make it even harder for newcomers to have access to HE? Will it not deter aspiring students? Not, we argue, if these changes are quality-assured by robust and innovative processes in the modern national (or regional) agencies that not enough countries have. Certainly not, if we expect each Institution to position itself clearly on its mission and to define the level of global, national, regional integration it seeks.