

Role of Applied Higher Education in the sustainable development of Europe and its regions

EURASHE's statement for the European Higher Education Area Ministerial Conference in Tirana 2024

The Bologna Process and Applied Universities

EURASHE deeply values the ongoing cooperation with Ministers, BFUG colleagues, and distinguished guests as we convene in Tirana to progress the objectives of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Our commitment over the past 25 years has significantly shaped a more integrated, innovative, and competitive European higher education landscape. Cooperation between countries and stakeholders within this process over the last 25 years has been instrumental in building a stronger, more cohesive EHEA. As we look towards 2030, we must amplify our ambition to make European higher education more **integrated, innovative, competitive, and responsive to society's evolving needs**.

EURASHE represents a thriving community of applied universities in over 30 countries within the EHEA. Its members are committed to excellence in applied higher education, including world-leading practices and outcomes. They are characterised by place based, applied research and engagement to meet the needs of cities and regions. They help to deliver talent and skills for industry and public services and support social inclusion. Recently applied universities have become much more active in transnational cooperation and international peer learning, thanks to initiatives such as the European University Alliances. Furthermore, EURASHE welcomes the European Commission's proposals for a European degree.

EURASHE welcomes the key topics in the Tirana Communiqué, despite the absence of an explicit recognition of professional education

We believe that today, after years of successful collaboration and many tools to make the EHEA a reality, our focus must extend to maintaining and enhancing a robust European platform that supports policy reform, information sharing, collaboration and further implementation of the commitments. This approach will not only guide the strategic objectives of the Bologna Process but will also account for the increased demands from a growing number of participating countries and the expansion of topics and issues compared to a decade ago.

Therefore, EURASHE supports the planned revision of operational guidelines for the EHEA and the establishment of a long-term Secretariat by 2027 to bolster its activities. Committed to collaboration within the Bologna Process framework, EURASHE is dedicated to achieving shared goals that benefit both Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their stakeholders.

As Europe faces the challenging green and digital transitions, professional education is essential for upskilling and reskilling in the context of lifelong learning. Despite recent calls for a greater focus on professional education, including by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, we regret that this has not been explicitly underlined by the Tirana Communiqué, as proposed by EURASHE during meetings of the Bologna Follow Up Group.

Below we elaborate on some of the key topics to be discussed in Tirana:

- [Reaffirmation of Fundamental Values](#)

The foreseen communique underscores the critical importance of upholding academic freedom, integrity, institutional autonomy, and active participation in governance by students and staff. Yet institutional autonomy should not be a reason to neglect the accountability of HEIs and their responsibility to develop knowledge and skills for the challenges that our societies and regions face. We believe that HEIs should ask themselves not just what they are good *at*, but also what they are good *for*.

- [Response to Geopolitical Challenges](#)

Considering current geopolitical tensions, particularly the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Communique emphasises strong support for Ukraine and maintains the suspension of Russia and Belarus from EHEA activities. Commitment to these principles highlights our role in the role of higher education in promoting peace and stability.

- [Commitment to Inclusion and Access](#)

A key focus of the EURASHE agenda is to ensure inclusion and access. We must create higher education systems that support students from diverse backgrounds, including those affected by socio-economic challenges and displaced individuals such as refugees. Higher education must be a beacon of hope and opportunity for all, regardless of their circumstances. The importance of access and inclusion is particularly relevant for EURASHE members that are located in all types of regions, including less developed and ‘left behind’ places. They help to prevent depopulation of peripheral regions and respond to economic change through reskilling and upskilling of an increasingly ageing workforce.

- [Innovation and Digital Transition](#)

The digital era presents both opportunities and challenges. The Communiqué calls for adapting higher education to this new landscape, responsibly integrating artificial intelligence, and revising tools like the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to accommodate new educational formats such as micro-credentials. We aim to ensure our systems remain relevant and effective in a rapidly changing nature of learning. In particular, applied universities strive for the effective recognition and high quality of internships and work-based learning which is offered by professionally oriented programmes.

- [Quality Assurance](#)

Valuing the role that Quality Assurance (QA) plays in integrating European Higher Education Systems and co-owning the system by QA Agencies, governments, stakeholders, and institutions, we welcome the call to revise the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) in time for the next ministerial conference. They should take into account changes in higher education systems as well as the wider world, and seek to integrate all the missions of HEIs into institutional quality assurance.

- **Promotion of Mobility and Internationalization**

Enhancing mobility and internationalisation is an important objective, including for at least 20% of students to experience physical or virtual mobility. By exploring more blended mobility options, we can foster a truly interconnected and collaborative educational environment. The international ambitions of all types of HEIs need to be recognised and supported by policymakers to achieve and speed up their further development. Mobility should be perceived as a means of brain circulation, adopting measures to ensure this occurs in a balanced way and benefits all parts of the EHEA.

- **Sustainable and Lifelong Learning**

Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, we welcome that the Communiqué advocates for sustainable education and lifelong learning pathways. We must recognise prior learning and facilitate upskilling and reskilling to meet the demands of the modern workforce and promote continuous personal and professional development.

Applied Higher Education boosting regional development

EURASHE is committed to transforming society through applied higher education in Europe. Applied Universities play a critical role in regional development by acting as hubs that link academic expertise with regional needs. We promote their integration into regional smart specialisation strategies, focusing on lifelong learning, social services, and innovation. To achieve that we believe that the strategic areas fostering this development shall be based on crucial elements:

Enhanced Stakeholder Dialogue through supporting the approaches that balance engagement with the work environment across governance, learning, and innovation, and on opening opportunities for lifelong learning across all generations.

Flexible Learning Pathways: We advocate for micro-credentials, promotion and the recognition of the short-cycle higher education, and work-based learning. These elements are crucial for addressing diverse learning needs and are supported by EURASHE's development of quality principles and tools.

Place based research: We support the integration of multi-disciplinary approaches as well as student involvement in research, from short-cycle studies to professional doctorates. This fosters a strong connection between education and the practical demands of firms, cities and regions. We call for greater investment in practice orientated research that responds to regional smart specialisation priorities. This requires more flexible academic careers which recognise and reward staff for their contribution all missions of HEIs, which should be better integrated.

Digital Transformation: Digital skills are essential in today's education landscape. We support inclusive and diverse digital education strategies that ensure quality and foster cooperation among HEIs. Our digital agenda aims to close socio-economic gaps and enhance online education accessibility.

Conclusion

EURASHE is dedicated to addressing challenges through joint European solutions, advocating for international cooperation and stronger policy support at all levels. We are ready to work with European institutions, governments, and other stakeholders to advance these goals. As we reflect on the purpose of higher education, we must remember that it is not only about integration but also about addressing the broader challenges Europe faces. By developing competencies for the digital and green transitions and considering our institutions' local and regional impact, we can ensure that higher education remains accountable and relevant to society.

We wish to thank you for your continued dedication and cooperation. Let us strive together to create a brighter, more equitable future for higher education in Europe.

Hannes Raffaseder
EURASHE President
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