

Educating the new European Professional towards Bologna 2020
Position Paper of the European Network for Universities of Applied Sciences
Bologna Ghent Seminar 19-20 May 2008

This paper sets out the views of the European Network for Universities of Applied Sciences (UASNET) to the BFUG non-paper 'Bologna beyond 2020'. UASNET is an informal network which brings together rectors' conferences and associations of professionally oriented higher education institutes throughout Europe.

The following grouping of rectors' conferences within UASNET have jointly discussed the Bologna reforms which led to this paper: Austrian Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (FHK), Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE), Danish Rector's Conference of Centers for Higher Education (CVU-Rektorkollegiet), Estonian Rectors' Conference of Professional Higher Education Institutions, French Conference of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (Assemblée des Directeurs d'IUT), Lithuanian Directors' Conference of Colleges, Portuguese Conference of Institutes of Technology (CCISP), and Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO-raad).

UASNET wishes to make its contribution to the discussion of the non-paper at the Bologna seminar in Ghent, May 19th and 20th 2008, by focusing on:

1. Firstly, what the main future goals of the Bologna Process should be,
2. Secondly, in what way the UAS sector of professionally oriented higher education is already contributing to these goals, and
3. Thirdly, which challenges the Bologna process consequently should take on in order to guarantee that higher education institutes are optimal equipped to make a strong contribution in reaching these goals.

In this way UASNET proposes to enhance the quality of the discussion at the Ghent Seminar and decision-making of the BFUG and Ministers.

1. Main future goals Bologna Process

We fully agree with the division made in the non-paper: Bologna should concentrate on finalising the initial agenda, as well as it should broaden its scope and address the most pressing societal issues for Europe in the forthcoming years.

In finalising the initial agenda on transparency, it is important to take into account differentiation within higher education on all levels. This means clarifying the orientation of higher education institutes and identifying profiles in higher education in all three cycles. In this respect a good description of the UAS profile of professionally oriented higher education next to that of research universities is a necessary condition for a further sustainable development of the knowledge society.

In broadening the scope of the Bologna Process, we see great potential in linking the Bologna Process to the Lisbon Agenda. The two processes combined will ensure a sustainable impact on the social and economic needs of European society.

2. Response of Universities of Applied Sciences to societal needs

Greater economical competitiveness of Europe asks for a sound social and economic structure of society, an enforcement of innovativeness of the business sector, and more higher educated knowledge workers. Because of their specific profile, universities of applied sciences are the designated partners to make a substantial contribution to realise these goals.

The larger part of UAS throughout Europe are strongly anchored in the region and maintain close ties with business, industry, SMEs, knowledge institutes and the public sector. What we have witnessed over the last few decades is a shift in expectations from society to our higher education institutes.

Business, industry, SMEs and the public sector not only expect UAS to educate new generations as to become excellent knowledge workers and members of the scientific community, but also expect assistance with the practical application of new knowledge and with further education and retraining of their employees.

It is no longer sufficient to provide education exclusively. Society expects from UAS that they take on their responsibility in solving societal issues as well. These correspond to the same issues as identified by the BFUG in its non-paper: the social dimension and life long learning, innovation by research and employability.

Therefore UAS nowadays operate more and more as innovative knowledge institutions, and have built up their experience in accommodating the new needs from society in their institutional mission. UAS are consequently committed to the following.

Social dimension and life long learning

The universities of applied sciences in Europe are working towards achieving an increase in the number of people with a higher level of education, both in the field of initial education and in the context of lifelong learning.

UAS train students, working professionals, individuals re-entering the labour market, people with a senior secondary vocational education and first-generation students. This is done by means of specific admission routes from vocational education and the training sector, flexible study programmes, talent programmes for students from a less advantaged socio-economic background and by using schemes based on the acknowledgment and accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). This enables universities of applied sciences to accommodate non-traditional, older and part-time students. For professionals engaged in lifelong learning, the Master programmes are gaining in importance, as they focus on complex professional practice and on practice-oriented research.

Practice oriented research

Professional practice throughout Europe has changed under influence of the development of the knowledge society. The image of a highly educated professional with a standard repertoire of knowledge and skills is outdated. Society expects a professional who continuously produces new and interdisciplinary knowledge on the basis of his or her competences and innovative talent, which can be directly applicable in practice.

Educating professionals for professional practice in the initial phase and in the context of life long learning is the core task of Universities of Applied Sciences. It will be clear that the demand for the new European professional means an adaptation in the way they are educated.

UAS are currently involved in accommodating these new demands: by embedding skills and competences in relation to knowledge acquisition, application and applied research in the curriculum. This is done by keeping close contact with innovative demands from the world of work and by offering assistance in developing innovative solutions for professional practice. In this way education can be kept up-to-date to present and future demands, further education needs from the working professional on the labour market can be met, and regional innovation is achieved.

Employability

The universities of applied sciences provide higher education for professionals who are immediately deployable in professional practice. They guarantee their students optimal alignment with the field of work.

This is ensured through internships, graduation assignments and practice-oriented research amongst companies and public institutions. Lecturers who are also active as entrepreneurs in the business or the public sector share their practical experience with students. Universities of applied sciences also consult closely with the field of work on curriculum development.

The effectiveness of this approach is clear from the fact that graduates usually find appropriate employment quickly and employers are satisfied with them. Our graduates are well equipped for the labour market.

3. Challenges for Bologna 2020: formulating the appropriate questions

Following from the identified goals in the social dimension, life long learning, innovation by research and employability, we suggest that the discussion on the future of the Bologna process concentrates on the actions needed to guarantee that higher education institutes are optimally equipped to make a strong contribution in reaching these goals. In short: what are the ambitions for higher education, the institutes and consequently the Bologna Process to make sure we address the current and future societal needs in Europe properly.

We propose that the following questions will be taken into account.

Educate more people, with a more diverse background

When we look at the social dimension and life long learning, this means that higher education institutes have to educate not only more people, but also more people with a different background in respect to age, culture and experience in education and working life. This leads to a substantial shift of paradigm for higher education institutes in education tasks both in content and quantity.

The first main question the Bologna Process therefore should address is:

- how to support the higher education institutes in Europe in such a way that they can accommodate their education in relation to a more diverse student population, and to a more differentiated qualifications framework, while at the same time maintaining the level and quality of higher education and increasing output.

Fast changing professional practice and globalisation

When we look at the demands for innovation and employability, this means a pressure on higher education institutes in two ways: providing a continuous translation of new knowledge for professional practice due to the concept of 'half-life' and globalisation of the labour market; and as a consequence keeping the team and competences of lecturers and professors up-to-date.

The second main question the Bologna Process therefore should address is:

- how the different and complementary roles of higher education institutes in fundamental or practice-oriented research should be supported in order to guarantee an optimal alignment with professional practice (business, industry, SMEs, public sector, knowledge institutes) and innovative demands from society.
- how to keep the staff in line with newly required competencies

Conclusion

These two questions follow logically from the analysis of the BFUG in the non-paper presented. Integrating these questions into the future Bologna Process would enhance its scope and quality, especially in addressing the most pressing needs from society in the next decades.

UASNET agrees that the social issues mentioned by the BFUG in its non-paper should be placed high on the agenda of the Bologna Process, and should be linked to the Lisbon Agenda. Moreover, UASNET identifies a clear overlap of this agenda with the activities universities of applied sciences undertake throughout Europe.

Therefore we see it as a necessary condition that the UAS profile in the various national educational systems for higher education will be supported to guarantee that UAS can continue to meet the needs of business and society.

We call on you, Ministers of the Bologna countries and members of the BFUG, to intensify the dialogue with UAS in your own countries against this background and to work towards a higher education system in which UAS can effectively unleash their potential. UAS are of course willing to participate in further consultations.