Challenges in European Higher Education

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Globalization, individualization, digitalization and information boom were fundamental world-wide changes that occurred during the 1990s, following the rise of international markets, communication and information technology in the 1980s. The economic and financial crisis of the 2010s has not only deepened and hastened these changes, but also set new challenges to the world in terms of restructuring the knowledge-based society through creativity and innovation, next to formulating new responses to the issues of climate and immigration, as well as to the widening gap between rich and poor. Higher education has to be deeply involved in this new phase, both through education and training (new competences for new jobs within the framework of lifelong learning), and through applied research (new knowledge to be implemented through innovation). Today, the world needs more and better educated graduates. Higher education institutions need to reformulate their missions and strategies.

Quality and innovation are *sine qua non* in achieving competitiveness in European higher education, especially when the focus is on its challenges in a global context. This principle certainly applies to the entire world as well. The starting point is the specific role, function and importance of professionally oriented higher education institutions and programmes of study, irrespective of the country context, and the direction they have taken to meet these challenges, especially through the active contribution of EURASHE (European Association of Higher Education Institutions) in the Bologna higher education reform process.

After ten years of intensive work in the Bologna Process by the governments and the organizations of higher education stakeholders, the development and implementation of relevant legislative frameworks in an increasing number of European countries, and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010, we have already entered the stage of further implementation on both state and institutional levels, moving from theory to practice, from rhetoric to implementation.

Professionally oriented higher education has, from the outset, focused on priority areas which could have inputs and outputs reflecting the specific mission of institutions and programmes with a labor market orientation, giving emphasis to a student-centred approach and employability of graduates. To this end, we published in March 2010 'EURASHE's Ten Commitments for the European Higher Education Area in 2020', a policy paper, in which we clarified our views on the main priority areas of the Bologna Process and stated our own

responsibilities and commitments towards the continuous implementation of the Bologna Process and EHEA. In this publication, on behalf of professionally oriented higher education, on the occasion of the ministerial conference and the celebration of the anniversary of the Bologna Process in Budapest and Vienna, we communicate an optimistic view on progress in the different areas covered in the 2009 Leuven Communiqué, having realized that progress in each domain very much depended on the willingness of governments and higher education stakeholders to change things. A large-scale European higher education reform would require great efforts from all types of higher education institutions, with continuous support from the governments and the active involvement of all stakeholders in higher education, including students, academic and administrative staff, and employers in both public and private sectors.

The following paragraphs identify the ten priority areas/challenges and explain how professionally oriented higher education would engage itself to help in effectively addressing them.

Quality assurance and multidimensional transparency tools

Quality assurance has been one of the most important components of the Bologna Process and the EHEA. It is vital that all European countries and all European higher education institutions implement punctually and with distinction the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' concerning internal and external quality assurance, and quality assurance agencies, as well as the function and operation of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

On the other hand, if diversity in higher education provision is to be considered an asset, a transparent, multidimensional classification system of instruments designed to benchmark higher education institutions on research and innovation, teaching and learning outcomes, services to society, etc, may help identify and make visible such diversity. The development of such transparency instruments is, however, inextricably linked to a well-functioning quality assurance system across the EHEA and to well-described qualification frameworks that are closely related to the missions of higher education institutions.

The social dimension

As referred to in the Bologna Process, the social dimension is part of a multidimensional political and socioeconomic matrix that cannot be achieved by means of education alone. Widening access to higher education, however, would be an important step towards a more sustainable and democratic society, to which a growing number of individuals with different backgrounds can make equally valuable contributions. The individual learner ideally attains the

highest level of education that is in line with his or her capacities, skills and desires, regardless of the socioeconomic, cultural or national background.

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs)

NQFs are designed to facilitate recognition, mobility and employability through transparency, comparability and transferability, not only between different countries but also between different sectors within a national higher education system. To fulfill this purpose, NQFs have been developed with a strong emphasis on learning outcomes, allowing a variety of learning paths to a given qualification, including formal and informal learning. They are linked to recognition of prior learning, certified against the overarching qualifications framework for the EHEA and aligned to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF).

Within NQFs, the establishment of learning outcomes as a central component places learners, rather than systems or institutions, at the heart of higher education. Focusing on learning outcomes on institutional level ensures appropriate attention to design, delivery and assessment of learning, and fosters student-centered learning mindset and culture within HE institutions.

The employability of graduates

From the outset of the Bologna Reform process, this has been considered a cornerstone in developing the three-cycle structure of higher education. The underlying concern is to make higher education more responsive to rapidly developing societies, with equally rapidly changing demands from the world of employment. This calls for flexibility and innovation in the contents, as well as in the structuring of higher education programs of study.

The best long-term future for the citizens of the world in general and of Europe in particular is the one that focusses on sustainable employability, rather than just immediate employment, and is inextricably linked to the constant pursuit of self-development and professional fulfilment through lifelong learning. Higher education institutions should be committed to ensuring that their graduates are prepared as completely as possible and on a diachronic basis for the job market and the world of work.

Lifelong learning

The changing labor market, the effects of the economic crisis and the increasing impact of information and communication technologies require a more flexible and mobile population. In view of the global ageing of the world population, technical, professional and academic knowledge will continually have to be updated. Lifelong learning will then be the organic and

essential part of the learning process at every level and in every sector of higher education. An accomplished EHEA requires the implementation of a system of linked and progressive cycles, which permit any qualified person to have access to and benefit from higher education, irrespective of age and educational profile. Inculcation of a culture of lifelong learning in graduates, and provision of lifelong learning opportunities, should be key elements of the mission of every higher education institution.

Student-centered learning

Since the beginning of the Bologna Process, the role of students, teachers and their learning environment has already undergone significant changes in accordance with the relatively new concept of student-centered learning. The learning-based society in a globalized world requires a number of competences that are universally accepted, such as interpersonal and intercultural competences, multilingualism, international awareness, ICT skills and – perhaps most importantly – the ability to learn how to learn in different formal and informal settings, including autonomous learning processes with adequate support and guidance structures.

Education, research and innovation

Different higher education institutions focus on different aspects of education according to their mission statements. The same holds for research where the profile of an institution will determine the scope and importance of its involvement in research. From this perspective, higher education is a major driver not only for economic and social development, but also for innovation in an increasingly knowledge-based world.

A successful strategy for innovation has to strive for economic prosperity, while securing and safeguarding societal welfare. This requires a sustainable innovation basis, which invests in building strategic alliances to foster innovation, creativity and applied research.

International openness

Present-day problems are worldwide and cannot be solved in a specific geographical area like the EHEA, but require a global platform for global solutions. Moreover, the creation of the knowledge-based society requires global awareness and responsibility, and higher education institutions can play an important role here in raising consciousness and in finding solutions through internationalization of programs and the study environment.

Mobility

Mobility is important for sharing and disseminating knowledge and skills among students and professionals. It contributes to the personal development and development of responsible citizenship of the individual and underpins the European identity and the multilingual tradition in a global context. Higher education institutions should further develop as places for international academic exchange and as providers of internationally skilled graduates, fostering student, staff and researcher mobility.

Funding

Increased government funding is essential to maintain the current level of studies, but may not be enough to increase substantially the proportion of young people that will complete a higher education program. The accrued benefit for society from the education system, in the form of skilled employees, entrepreneurs and independent researchers, vastly outweighs the current investment. This makes it both realistic and desirable to invest efforts and resources into education, research and innovation, thus securing additional external funding.

Implementation of all of the above, and the achievement of a competitive EHEA, requires a holistic approach, taking action on all aspects of the Bologna Process. Apart from this major requirement, the active and productive involvement of all types of higher education institutions and of all higher education stakeholders is an essential prerequisite for success at this historic milestone in European education. Collective investment in education safeguards and further improves the current level of welfare and well-being of citizens, and even more importantly, it gives the next generations opportunities to build their own future.

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Andreas G. Orphanides (a.orphanides@euc.ac.cy) is the Rector of European University Cyprus and the President of the European Association of Higher Education Institutions (EURASHE) that represernts over 1200 European universities, polytechnics and other higher education institutions. He holds a Bachelor's degree from the University of Athens (Greece), a Master's and a Ph.D. degree from the University at Albany (USA), and a Doctor Honoris Causa award from "Ovidius" University of Costanza (Romania). Previously he served as President and Vice-President of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and other European associations, as Rector of Cyprus College, and as Board member of the Open University of Cyprus. Professor Orphanides has played a key role in the Bologna Process and in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), in quality assurance in European higher education, as well as in the development of higher education in Cyprus. His main areas of expertise are policy making, leadership and quality assurance in higher education.