

Update of the UNICE activities regarding the Bologna process

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From a business point of view the most important issues regarding the education of young people are still: the employability of graduates, and ensuring the high quality of study-programmes and higher education institutions.

The official Bologna seminar on employability, which was organised by the Welsh Assembly, was an excellent opportunity to increase the debate and the exchange between the different stakeholders. UNICE presented the key factors of what the world of business means by using the phrase “employability”. Furthermore it was and is the interest of UNICE to support the higher education institutions to reach the target employability of graduates. The conference was very helpful in this regard.

UNICE is in the process of preparing an official position paper on employability which will be published in good advance before the ministerial meeting in London in May next year. The aim is to give a definition of employability and at the same time give several examples of how to ensure employability in cooperation between higher education institutions and enterprises. These good practices will come from different European countries and will take into account the different profiles of higher education institutions around Europe. UNICE’s aim is to intensify the discussion and the activities within that field both regarding higher education institutions and enterprises.

Therefore the internal debate between the members of UNICE has been very intense over the past months and one of the results of this process is that more and more member associations are active in the wide field of higher education policy and especially regarding the Bologna Process. From the beginning it was one of the most important goals of UNICE’s education activities to increase the engagement of all member organisations within the field of higher education policy. The activities during recent months have mainly focused on that target. Now it is important to create a continuous contact between the world of business and higher education institutions regarding education and to exchange ideas and expectations. There are already a lot of good examples of how to manage such cooperation around Europe – but the interest of enterprises to cooperate with higher education institutions to ensure the employability not only of graduates but also of employees is not known yet in all higher education institutions.

The second important issue set from the employers’ point of view is the quality assurance and transparency of study programmes and higher education institutions. UNICE is closely following the ongoing debate regarding the implementation of ENQA’s European Standards and Guidelines in the national quality assurance systems. Furthermore the discussion of creating a European register is another relevant aspect. In this respect UNICE was one of the stakeholders who were active in giving statements and suggestions how to arrange such a register. We will follow the further development very closely and give more input if necessary.

To date, UNICE has shown broad support for the future establishment of the EQF. Having been active in the relevant working groups both within the Bologna Process and the activities of the European Commission, UNICE welcomes the fact that the EQF encompasses both higher education and vocational education and training (VET) in a lifelong learning perspective. It is also crucial for employers that the proposed reference levels are expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences, thereby allowing the various reference levels to be reached by individuals via different learning pathways (formal, non-formal and informal). This can increase transparency of competences acquired by individuals, ease national and cross-border staff mobility and hence contribute to a better matching of supply and demand on European labour markets. The main added value of the EQF for employers would be to foster development of National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) in each country and, in countries where NQFs exist, to open up NQFs to non-formal and informal learning pathways. However, the key for UNICE is to achieve a well designed EQF and the results of the testing phase will be important before taking final decisions on the right approach.

Finally, UNICE will continue to develop activities regarding the most important aspects of the Bologna Process (which are employability, quality assurance and transparency) both with its member associations and regarding the discussion and co-operation with other stakeholders.