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National Priority Statement: Romania

Meeting of the National Committee for PHE Excellence

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1. Current State of Professional Higher Education in Romania

=SWOT Analysis=

Strengths

- Desire for cooperation of all the actors and agents involved (including business representatives)
- The high level of expertise of some of the personnel/ actors/ stakeholders working in PHE
- The development of on-line learning environments (but are those compatible with the imperative of engaging the student with the proper professional environment during his studies?)
- Fiscal facilities for employers

Weaknesses

- Slow adaptive response to change on the labour market
- Lack of sufficient human and material resources
- Curricula lags behind the innovative changes in different professional fields
- Lack of coherent strategies for PHE education at the national and regional level, as well as poor alignment to European strategies in the field
- PHE-related concepts are poorly defined in regulations
- Unclear methodologies
- Insufficient coherence of PHE-related regulations
- Distant relations between PHE institutions and employers' representatives
- The difficulties in attracting students towards technical education
- Access routes to PHE

- Alumni's difficulties in finding a job after graduation
- The relation between the PHE institutions and the normative bodies in the field is very opaque (eg. How do the different accreditation bodies coordinate each other and work towards a common frame? Who defines professional standards and how are all the stakeholders involved in the process?)
- Many professions on the labour market define their occupational standards in an ad hoc manner, without creating a formal standard (How do they assess the so-called competencies?)
- Internships are not subjected to strict monitoring and controlling on behalf of the authorities
- It is unclear what are the students' expectations from an ideal PHE programme

Opportunities

- Funding opportunities, such as Erasmus+ and other EU funding
- Competition among PHE institutions, which fosters high performance
- Partnerships between PHE institutions and the business environment regarding internships and student placements
- The possibility of enforcing a state-funded scholarship system which compels students to follow a specific PHE educational program
- Emphasis on developing personal competencies
- E-learning opportunities
- Examples of good practices that can be used for creating a good strategy at the national level
- A competence driven model for PHE (clearer requirements for new master's programs, a stronger connection between the courses and the competencies)
- The pressure coming from the business environment towards PHE institutions

Threats

- Decrease of trust in higher education in general
- Decrease of interest for learning in the young generation
- Poor social dialogue
- The existing regulations impede the development of vocational master programs (since min 50% of the faculty involved must hold a PhD)
- External actors who take advantage of the flawed system to push their own education offer in the detriment of universities
- The competition with other European PHE institutions

- Universities' role and image has changed; they are no longer seen as scholarly environments, but as mere service providers (providing a diploma)
- The strong emphasis on the employers' requirements can place universities in a vulnerable position and may negatively affect the quality of the curricula

2. Mission statement – ideal model

When discussing the ideal model of PHE one should take into consideration not only how PHE is actually organized in Romania, but also the way in which Romanian society thinks about professional education in general.

First – the current situation of PHE is, obviously, influencing the main actors within the PHE field, and especially those providing courses & qualifications.

Recently, the Ministry of Education in Romania made a significant change in organizing PHE. Namely, universities across the country were allowed to organize such courses, which were previously delivered by organizations like specialized educational centers or institutes. Those educational centers & institutes were not coordinated and funded by the ministry of education, like universities are but by other national bodies such as Ministry of culture, Labor Ministry, Foreign Affairs Ministry or by structures belonging to local administration. The representatives of those educational centers & institutes were advocating that this measure not only weakness the entire process of PHE but is also periclitating the economic situation and the welfare of organizations involved in PHE. On the other hand, Universities, do not have yet the men power nor the infrastructure required by a large-scale involvement in PHE, as shown by their low interest in this matter.

The second aspect one should consider is the societal view upon professional education in general. For historical and social reasons that we will not insist upon, Romanian society is not much valuating what we currently call “professional” education. Parents usually insist that their kids must enroll in a high school proposing a general curriculum, rather than in a professional high school which is usually associated with poor school performances and with low chances of employment. When it comes to professional higher education things are a improving (since higher education is quite valued) but PHE programs have the role to complete or to broaden a University education (bachelor degree). In this respect, PHE programs are actually competing against master programs. On the other hand, students from universities across the country are insisting that there is an urgent need for putting more time and resources into “internship”, “practical knowledge”, “practical skills” etc. Furthermore, it is commonly thought by students and parents (although this is not proved by an academic study) that employers are disregarding a potential employee with high grades but with none or very little “practical experience”. So students enroll in “theoretical”

higher education program and then they are skipping classes in order to work and acquire “practical experience”.

This being said, the PHE ideal model, as it was discussed by those participating was constructed on the following lines:

(1) *Institutionalizing/ enhanced formalization of fellowships, internship, traineeship and similar activities*

Although the University curriculum includes a compulsory internship of 2-3 weeks within an organization, during the first and / or the second year of study, those internships are not really co-monitored. The university has little to interfere with the internship, and the organization where the internship takes place, has even less to do with the University. Therefore, internship must be re-tailored in such a way to enhance collaboration between students, working environment and universities.

(2) *University – driven PHE programs*

Universities need to get involved in PHE at a larger scale than previous; their taking an active and increasing role in PHE will increase the quality of the educational program and will further strengthen the ability of graduate students to adapt to and to respond to demands of the labor market. Also, universities will contribute to a more accurate definition and control of the educational process in terms of: what competences are required, how to validate the acquisition of those specific competences, how to update those competences as there are fields of activity requiring to be constantly re-shaped.

(3) *Addressing regional opportunities*

When developing both curricula and educational centers in order to address the PHE, policymakers should use a regional frame of thinking; EU development regions are a huge opportunity for people residing in those regions. Academics as well as public administrators have to be aware of funding opportunities, sustainable development within a given region and the specificity of regional economic condition when implementing PHE programs.

3. Challenges and barriers in achieving an ideal scenario of PHE in Romania

a. Related to Costs

- institutions have to invest time and money in order to achieve an ideal type of PHE in Romania

b. Related to PHE insitutions & the labour market

- Slow adaptation of educational curricula to the transformations and innovations on the (constantly changing and evolving) labour market – which triggers difficulties in integrating higher education with the world of work;
- Deficient implementation by (professional) higher education institutions of European higher education policies;
- Existing imbalances between theory and practice (which often render unclear the utility of the study and increase alumni’s difficulties in finding a job after graduation);
- Slow response to the demands of internal and external stakeholders by (professional) higher education institutions;
- Poor validation of the educational/ vocational programs that prepare the students for the labour market with the labour market requirements. Validation must be done in a system involving many actors (academics, institutional/ business sector representatives, professionals, stakeholders, employers);

c. Related to PHE regulatory bodies

- Lack of standardized/ uniform curricula for certain specializations at the national level (e.g. the educational and professional standards for the various specializations must be pursued nationally and not regionally);
- Poor definitions/ conceptualizations for what may be called a “quality framework” in the relationship between education, research and professional practice
- Unclear/ opaque institutional infrastructure defining PHE-related concepts (e.g. “competence”, “profession”, “occupational standards”, etc.);
- Scarce representation of normative bodies in charge with the strict monitoring and evaluation of internships and their role in enhancing (professional) higher education programs;
- Evaluation issues (What is the composition of the team conducting evaluation in the domain of PHE?)