



## **EUA'S THEMATIC PEER GROUPS**

### **Empowering students for their future professional life and civic engagement**

#### **FINAL REPORT**

This report is the result of the work of the thematic peer group (hereafter, 'the group') on 'empowering students for their future professional life and civic engagement', which met in the framework of EUA's Learning & Teaching Initiative<sup>1</sup>. Over the course of three meetings<sup>2</sup>, the group discussed institutional challenges and practices in relation to this topic and identified three main principles that higher education institutions should take into account when developing their activities in this area. In this report, each principle is outlined, with a brief explanation of the challenges that it seeks to address, suggestions of how to put the principles into practice and additional considerations for a range of stakeholders.

#### **Principle 1: Integrate and explicitly identify skill development (transversal/professional competences) into the formal curriculum**

Many institutions offer a comprehensive range of courses and activities that support students in developing transversal skills and professional competences. However, one of the key issues identified by the group was that these are often voluntary extra-curricular activities and are only accessed by a small percentage of students – usually those that are highly engaged and motivated and in many cases, in least need of such services. Reaching the students who would benefit most appears to be a widespread challenge. In order to engage with all students, it is necessary to integrate the development of transversal skills into the curriculum and explicitly identify these in the curriculum description and expected outcomes. In parallel, engaging teachers to implement changes to the curriculum was also identified as being a challenge shared across many institutions, particularly as it may involve them changing their teaching style and/or sacrificing other components of the curriculum.

Some approaches to applying this principle include:

- Allocating a certain number of ECTS for civic engagement or for modules focusing specifically on transversal skill development and making this a compulsory part of the curriculum (in the same way as work placements are already integrated into curricula and recognised through ECTS for programmes in many disciplines).
- Adapting teaching and learning methods to put greater emphasis on transversal skill development combined with discipline-specific knowledge acquisition and application, for example through service learning, problem-based learning and work-based learning. The group identified taking a cross-disciplinary approach as a key way to add value by maximising synergies between different disciplines and exposing students to a wider range of issues.

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<sup>1</sup> The group consisted of institutional representatives from: Dublin City University (Ireland) (group coordinator); University of Zaragoza (Spain); Vrije Universiteit Brussels (Belgium); University of Lucerne (Switzerland); Università di Milano Bicocca (Italy); Management Center Innsbruck (Austria); University of Tampere (Finland); and University of Bucharest (Romania). Some meetings were also attended by students from Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Università di Milano Bicocca and University of Bucharest. Other institutions consulted with their students in between meetings.

<sup>2</sup> The group met on: 24 March 2017 in Dublin (Ireland), 11 April 2017 in Milan (Italy), and 8 June 2017 in Brussels, Belgium.



- Reviewing existing curricula and explicitly identifying the skills that are being developed through the established modules and approaches. This point is of particular importance in systems where there is very little flexibility in curriculum design due to national regulations, making it difficult to implement the first two points.

Additional considerations for successful applications of the approaches above include:

- Taking a holistic approach to curriculum design and delivery, including cooperation between academic staff and support staff in order to embed transversal skill development into curricula and explore cross-disciplinary approaches. Consideration should also be given to appropriate assessment methods, including possible separation between the assessment of knowledge and skills. One approach is that the grade given for generic skills does not formally count towards the degree mark, but is an indicative assessment for the student, as well as a way of enabling the institution to monitor whether it is supporting the development of these skills effectively.
- Ensuring support for academic staff to develop their teaching skills. This may be a question of
  - Resources: for pedagogical development: ensuring sufficient support for pedagogical development is offered and that academic staff have time to dedicate to it;
  - values: promoting parity of esteem between research and teaching activities and recognising good teaching in order to motivate and engage staff in developing their own skills.
- Developing a learning environment that supports students in taking responsibility for their own learning. This might include increased emphasis on giving feedback to students about their transversal skill development, instead of, or as well as simply assessing it, as well as offering sufficient guidance for students in making study choices.
- Cooperating with external stakeholders and student organisations to develop opportunities for civic engagement that can be recognised through ECTS.
- Allowing some flexibility in curriculum design to give room for the inclusion of different approaches. This may require regulation changes at institutional or national level.

## **Principle 2: Recognise or reward skills developed through non-formal learning and civic engagement**

While the first principle focuses on embedding skills development into the curriculum, the second principle reflects that further learning takes place outside the formal curriculum. This principle addresses the challenge of how to recognise or reward activities that cannot or should not be fitted into the formal curriculum in order to emphasise their value and encourage engagement.

Some approaches to applying this principle include:

- Offering ECTS for voluntary activities, for example involvement in running student organisations or community/charity work. This differs from the approach mentioned under principle 1, in that it is a non-compulsory activity, but is nonetheless recognised through ECTS and included in the diploma supplement or equivalent.
- Developing and implementing digital badging schemes as a way of recognising specific activities or skills. This might range from completing a certain period of voluntary work, developing specific skills either through dedicated courses or through other activities, for example leadership skills demonstrated through positions in student/community organisations.



- Rewarding students who make a significant contribution to university life or civil society through their extra-curricular activities, for example through prizes or awards.

Additional considerations for successful applications of the approaches above include:

- Introducing an institutional digital badging scheme requires a clear policy on what is being recognised and how. Institutions may also consider cooperating with other institutions to develop a broader system that could carry more value externally and enhance comparability.
- Providing opportunities for student-led initiatives for prizes or awards, for example through institutional or faculty student unions, in order to encourage ownership at student level.
- Recognising that student ownership and willingness to engage in extra-curricular activities also varies from one context to another and may depend on the extent to which there is already a tradition of student involvement, as well as their ability to fit extra activities into their schedule (due to course workload or part time work). It is important to bear in mind the contextual starting point when considering how to engage students in such activities.

### **Principle 3: Embed responsibility, ownership and opportunities for reflection across the institution**

The group recognised that in order to effectively empower students for their future civic engagement and professional lives, these aspects cannot be viewed in isolation. Therefore this final principle runs through many of the approaches discussed in principles 1 and 2. Responsibility for this needs to be embedded into the institutional culture at all levels. Closely linked to this is the need to support reflective practice across the institution in order to foster ownership among staff and students for their own development and to facilitate a broader awareness of an institution's role in society. At the student level, it was noted that many students develop generic skills during their time at university, but are not explicitly aware of it and therefore do not communicate it, for example to prospective employers.

Some approaches to applying this principle include:

- Communicating the importance of developing civic and professional skills, alongside discipline-specific knowledge, to the institutional community in order to create a common understanding of it.
- Identifying students' needs at the point of admission so they can be addressed throughout the period of enrolment. Reflection on professional skills often takes place only in the later stages of the students' time at university. By integrating into the admission or orientation process a reflection (e.g. self-assessment) on which generic competences the student has, is lacking or would like to improve, the student develops an early awareness of this issue and the institution can be better target them with information about the available opportunities. Trigger points should be embedded at certain points in the student life cycle to ensure a continuous reflection process. This approach also takes into account that needs differ considerably from one student to another. This is particularly relevant in a time of an increasingly diverse student body in which, for example, mature students who already have professional experience have a very different starting point and existing skill set to those coming into higher education directly from school.
- Embedding reflective practice into development paths for both staff and students in order to increase awareness and facilitate ownership:
  - For students, this means becoming aware of the skills that they do and do not have so as to improve where they have a skills deficiency and to better communicate the skills



that they do have. One approach is requiring students to maintain a portfolio documenting their skills with practical examples. The use of professional mentors can also support this, by providing an outside view of the skills that are valued in the workplace.

- For staff at all levels, this means reflecting on their own skills and engaging in opportunities for continued professional development. Institutional leadership should lead the way in supporting and valuing life-long learning.

Additional considerations for successful applications of the approaches above include:

- Defining and communicating the institution's societal mission both internally and externally in order to reflect the importance of this alongside the research and teaching missions. This may also be reflected in the way in which institutions communicate about their degree programmes to prospective students, emphasising the transversal and citizenship skills that will be gained in addition to the discipline-specific knowledge.
- Integrating reflective practice requires proper planning in order to be effective. Space should also be given for experimentation, recognising that not all approaches will succeed. To support this, opportunities should be provided for the exchange of good practice across the institution in order to multiply successful practice and allow the institutional community to learn from each other.
- Using technology effectively to facilitate teaching and support services. In this regard it is important to focus on harnessing digital opportunities, not making the use of technology a goal in itself.

In summary, these three principles reflect the need for both formal and informal approaches to empowering students for their future professional lives and civic engagement. It also becomes clear that this issue cannot be an 'add-on' activity for students and staff, but should be integrated into university life in order to be successful.

Institutional leadership plays an important role in ensuring the university's social mission receives due attention and by creating the right framework conditions for staff and students to take ownership of their personal development.

Academic and support staff should work together, and with external stakeholders like employers, to integrate the development of transversal skills into curricula and recognise skills acquired through non-formal learning. Approaches should also take into account the differing needs of individual students.

Students should reflect on the importance of gaining transversal skills and take responsibility for their own development by engaging with the opportunities offered by their institution.