

White Paper

of EUE-Net – University Enterprise Network for cooperation and dialogue

1. Background

EUE-Net is an Erasmus Network including more than 53 partners (universities, enterprises, authorities and European associations) from 29 European countries that started in 2004 with the goal to establish a European framework to promote an active cooperation between the University and Enterprises sectors.

The Network completing its first 3 years cycle of activity (EUI-Net www.eui-net.org), the main achievements being related to:

1. Building the partnership and identification of a core group of committed partners with relevant experience in Europe
2. Setting up the main tools of the project to enable the European wide debate on the issues of U-E cooperation (regular conferences, Targeted workshops, Special Interest Groups, Professional insertion and U-E cooperation projects).
3. Identification of the relevant actors in Europe for the U-E cooperation viewpoint and attracting them into the Network debate as well as future members
4. Setting up an official structure in Europe for the U-E cooperation.

Following the large scale debates that took place within the network events, and a dialogue that has been opened within an extended partnership that includes some very important new partners (like UEAPME, JEUNE etc), EUE-Net has succeeded to define its long term vision. After the two EUE-Net Conferences and other several Special Interest Groups workshops, as well as targeted brainstorming meetings, project EUE-Net launched a comprehensive agenda for the next cycle of three years. The main lines of this strategy are summarized below.

2. Action lines for the New University – Enterprise dialogue

EUE-Net aims to directly contribute to Lisbon agenda, for jobs and growth in the knowledge based society. Taking into account the millions of graduates that enter the professional life each year as “knowledge vectors”, it is clear that the University represents not only the place of new knowledge creation, but also the main agent for knowledge diffusion to the society and especially towards enterprises. In this context a systematic focus on the University-Enterprise (U-E) cooperation on this issue is urgently needed and fully justified.

At present, although the university period represents practically the last stage of education before a young graduate begins the professional life, there is a lack of cooperation between the University and Enterprise sectors in order to better prepare the transition of the graduate from the student status to the professional life. Several institutions types already exist in the European countries to support this transition, but there is no systematic approach in Europe in order to integrate their efforts and build an appropriate cooperation framework.

In general, at the end of their studies, the young university graduates face three possible scenarios:

S1: get immediately a job which is available on the labor market

S2: create his/her own job through entrepreneurship. They must cross a very difficult stage (the beginning, when rather investments are needed and the benefits are not present) and the other problem is that compared to USA, in Europe very few young graduates take this challenge.

S3: face delays in identifying the appropriate job

Although S1 and S2 are predominant, still too often the third scenario happens in Europe. A consistent and full strategy is needed together with the appropriate instruments in order to significantly reduce number of S3 cases, by increasing S1 and especially S2.

In order to reach this objective, a systematic University-Enterprise cooperation approach for employment is proposed at European level, accompanying the student from early stages of university studies till the full integration into the professional environment. This will be addressed through a structured and well focused cooperation between U-E, based on three action lines (AL), meant to accompany the student on his/her transition from the class room to the employment:

AL1: Increasing the quality of student practical placements through an European approach for Quality Assurance of practical placements in enterprises (this measure addresses the studentship period);

AL2: Targeted practical placement for entrepreneurship (addresses the last 6 months of studentship, preceding the employment stage)

AL3: European Network of Student Career Offices (SCO) - addresses the period between graduation and the employment moment.

In order to carry out the activities associated with the above action lines, the partnership called hereinafter "EUE-Net - European University-Enterprise Cooperation Network" must bring together Universities (including the target group represented by the **student** associated with the SCOs that will be included as separate partners) and Enterprises but also social partners currently playing an important role in the employment process: Associations of SMEs, Associations of entrepreneurs in Europe, Chambers of commerce etc.

3. Description of the new action lines

AL1: Quality of student practical placements

Practical placement of students in enterprises is an important part of the current University curriculum, with direct influence on the employability of the future graduate, as it facilitates the first contacts of the student with the real life environment in a small scale professional exercise. In many European countries there is a good practice and valuable experience in organizing this typical activity of U-E cooperation (e.g Germany, France etc), based on *regional reference centers for practical placement* that achieve the necessary bridge between the two sectors, such as the practical placement be profitable for both parties: a quality educational stage valuable for the training programme and at the same time a small contribution to the enterprise activity.

However, these best practice cases are rather scattered in Europe and by now it is obvious that they will not self generalize unless accompanying measures are established at an European level. Moreover, while the transnational mobility increased dramatically in Europe thanks to actions like Erasmus, and Leonardo, the transnational practical placements fall now out of the quality system established by the existing reference centres as the direct contact (i.e. cooperation) between the sending university and the receiving enterprise is much more difficult because of the distance.

In this context, it is obvious that a cooperation agent with distributed sites operating throughout Europe is urgently needed in order to cope with the quality issues raised by the increasing number of trans-national mobility flow for practical placements in a continuously integrating Europe. Therefore an *European network of reference centers* is proposed to be established within the EUE-Net in order to undertake the mediation and quality control of practical placements both at local and European level.

AL2: Targeted practical placement for entrepreneurship

While the student approaches the graduation, in order to increase the chances of a quick employment a more complex and targeted practical placement needs to be organized likely to enhance his/her chances on the labor market. For this purpose the last practical placement should not be just a regular one, but more targeted towards the identification/creation of the future first job. A *pilot entrepreneurship twinning scheme* is proposed as an innovative model for the graduation practical placement. This practical placement should not involve a single enterprise but

at least 2 from different countries to jointly organize the diploma practical placement for the student with the aim to promote a new business approach, likely to CREATE the future job of the student. At the end of this placement, the graduate will enhance his/her employment chances either in the enterprises involved by the creation of a new job or by initiating a new business in cooperation with the 2 enterprises.

AL3: European Network on Student Career Offices (CDO).

CDOs are by nowadays operational in all Member States as well as in the Candidate Countries. Hundreds of CDOs are already working on a regional or national basis throughout Europe. By their nature, CDOs represent another "natural bridge" that has been established between the University and Enterprise sectors. Usually, the CDOs are managed by students and have already a range of typical activities like maintaining job databases and organizing periodic job fairs, to name only a few. CDOs are a very successful scheme that is successfully providing accompaniment to the students in their transition from the class-room to the enterprise. Usually a CDO database includes between 5000-50000 records related to students looking for a job and thousands of recruiting enterprises, with job profiles, requirements etc. However, the success and achievements of the CDOs is still not fully exploited by the Universities, especially related to their databases. This action line aims to create an European network of CDOs in order to integrate the European dimension in this activity, especially to achieve an integrated European job database, but also to create a pan European forum for debates on the U-E cooperation best practice, problems, new initiatives etc. On the other hand, the opportunity to create a pan European job database by connecting and integrating the existing CDO databases is of an invaluable importance. The usefulness and impact of such database on the higher education will be certainly extremely high. It is anticipated that a network of CDOs will strongly increase the U-E communication and cooperation towards an enhanced employability. The database will allow having an European barometer of the employment demand, profiles, knowledge needs in Europe, information that is crucial for the Universities that urgently need to adapt their studies and curricula to the enterprises needs. EUE-Net is currently conducting an experiment involving two partner University CDOs that will demonstrate the potential of such a network.

4. Conclusions

Although intense, the first years of activity of EUE-Net resulted in nothing more than revealing the huge amount of effort needed in order to put in practice a European concept on University-Enterprise cooperation. In the context of Lisbon agenda and the emergence of the knowledge based society, it is clear that an European approach for University – Enterprise cooperation is an urgent need. Several layers of activity have been identified within EUE-Net debates, requiring a concerted action in all European member and candidate states. Some of the proposed activities could no more be considered as improvements but urgent *corrections* needed in a society that advances very quickly. The establishment of a permanent structure across Europe to undertake these activities at least in complement for the existing instruments seems to be an urgent necessity.

However, establishing a framework to undertake these activities needs a systematic and focused approach, first to design and establish the appropriate distributed infrastructure, involve the appropriate actors, derive plans of activities and then implement the strategy.