# HERE Annual Conference Report

## From social inclusion to skills: Pressing themes in higher education policy making

December 12-13, 2019

Charles University Prague, Czech Republic

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The topic

The Annual HERE (Higher Education Reform Expert) conferences have served as an important venue for tackling transversal policy themes that frame the HERE activities. As the largest HERE event of the year, they are also a forum for more extensive networking amongst HERE.

The 2019 HERE Annual Conference had the dual purpose of:
- Addressing the umbrella topic of social inclusion, around which SPHERE events for 2019 were structured, and framing the lessons learned from these different activities;
- Introducing the new umbrella topic for 2020, **"Higher education responding to changing skills needs."** And giving HERE a voice in the programming of activities for 2020.

In addition, it provided opportunity for the HERE to discuss - at the level of regions and also thematically - certain sub-themes which were of specific relevance to countries in which HERE are active. It also served as a platform to present forthcoming plans for the Erasmus+ programme in its next programming period, and how this may impact cooperation opportunities with Partner countries.

The following report provides an overview of the proceedings and reflects upon the HERE reactions to the topics addressed. It should be taken as complementary to the outcomes reports which have been produced for the three study visits and one seminar that took place in 2019, organized by SPHERE. All reports can be found on www.supporthere.org.

## 1.2 Objectives

- Understand the current driving forces regarding social inclusion in higher education and extract lessons from the HERE events that have been held in 2019;
- Create linkages between the topics of social inclusion, internationalisation and mobility and understand better how these topics are approached (or not approached) in EU and Partner countries and also via EU mobility programmes;
- Understand the current policy thinking around the skills agenda and the role of higher education in a changing labour market landscape, as themes that will be further tackled in the 2020 SPHERE programme.
- Draw lessons from different partner countries on how they tackle specific higher education reform themes, both at institutional and national level;

## 1.3 Attendance

The conference drew 95 participants – academics, administrators and policy makers. Of these, 73 came from 24 partner countries. Seven EU Member States were represented, including 8 speakers who have served as experts in a number of HERE activities, such as Technical Assistance Missions, study visits and seminars. Seven of the HERE

who attended were new to the network and had only been appointed in 2019. Five ministries representatives attended, incuding one member of Parliament, from HERE countries. Twenty NEO attended, as well representatives from the Czech National Agency. On the side of the European Commission, both DG EAC and DG employment attended, as well colleagues from the EACEA who manage the SPHERE action.

# 2. Preparation for the conference

In order to tailor the event to participants' needs, the SPHERE team undertook a pre-survey designed to scan, 1) if participants had participated in study visits or seminars in 2019, 2) if they had participated in the study on Social Inclusion in ICM, 3) their general expectations for the conference and 4) their priorities for topics that could be explored in the 2020 meta-theme of employability and skills in higher education. .

## 2.1 Summary of pre-survey results

Of the 82 respondents to the pre-survey, including 2 local Czech participants and one EU speaker, 28 HERE indicated that is was their first annual conference. In terms of other 2019 events:
- 10 participated in the Study visit to VU Amsterdam on social inclusion
- 17 participated in the Seminar in Moldova on recognition (primarily NEOs)
- 11 participated in the Study visit to FU Campus Wien (Austria) on Competence-Based Learning
- 6 participated in the Study visit to Brussels (VUB) on social inclusion and mobility

In terms of what they took away from these events, the following provides some examples:

| Event | Take-away |
|---|---|
| Study visit to VU Amsterdam on social inclusion | Demographic pressures and migration are among the factors that require universities to address a more diverse student population and also to consider this in their staffing policies. This involves a review of educational policies, approaches and university strategies to make universities more inclusive. (Moldova) |
| Seminar in Moldova on recognition | A better understanding of international conventions for recognition as well as the existing tools developed for the purpose of facilitating the recognition and making it more transparent. I learned to distinguish between recognition and admission as a parallel between licensing and quality assurance. (Lebanon) |
| Study visit to FU Campus Wien (Austria) on Competence-Based Learning | Competence based learning is a key issue for quality assurance and employability; While developing content for competence-based learning it's crucial to combine theoretical knowledge with practitioners' experience. (Georgia) |
| Study visit to Brussels (VUB) on social inclusion and mobility | The issues of social inclusion as a whole are relevant and, in principle, are discussed at different levels. Nevertheless, social integration is often understood very narrowly - as providing physical and cultural space for persons with disabilities in order to increase access to higher education of this social group. In this connection, it would be good to expand this |

|  | understanding and, taking into account the ever-increasing internationalization of higher education, consider the possibility of creating offices at universities, which would deal with the issues of social inclusion of not only disabled people, but also students from low-income families and national minorities, in including with foreign students. (Uzbekistan)

I was struck by the economic implications student mobility had on students coming from disadvantaged communities, that we had started to reshape our institutional mobility policy. (Israel) |
|---|---|

In addition, 15 participants indicated that they were interviewed for the SPHERE Study in social inclusion and mobility (International Credit Mobility – ICM), from Moldova, Montenegro, Azerbaijan, Lebanon, Palestine, Kazakhstan, Egypt, Russia, Armenia, Georgia and Morocco.

In terms of the **proposed meta-theme for 2020 (higher education fostering skills and employability),** HERE were asked to express the priorities in terms of sub-topics. Student tracking and employability, Competence-based learning in practice and university-industry collaboration generated the highest interest:
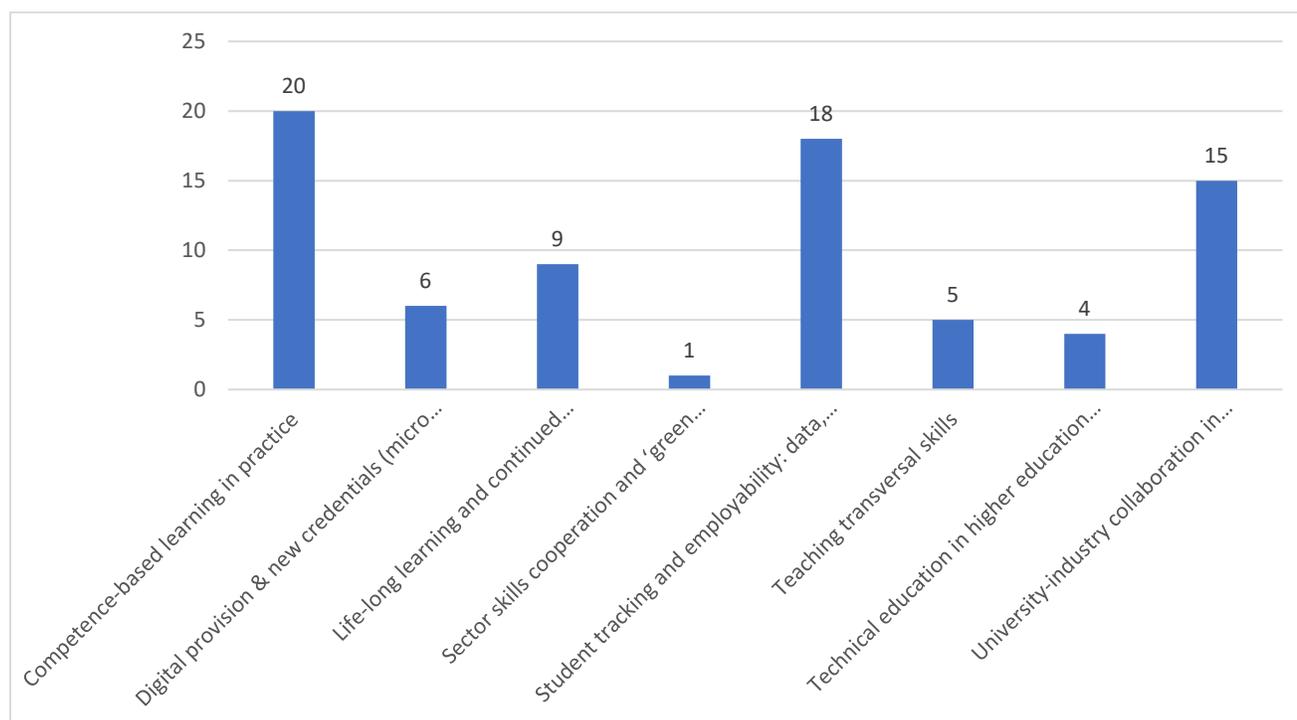


Finally, HERE were asked to list the **top challenge in their countries when it comes to developing skills for present and future labour market needs**. The following is an example of some of the answers, which subsequently fueled the discussion in the second day of the conference:

| Armenia | Follow-up of graduate employment tracking |
|---|---|
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | Digital competence and traversal skills - awareness and institutional strategies. |
| Egypt | The weak definition of job requirements which are needed when conceiving skills and competencies in higher education programmes |
| Israel | How to incorporate art and design in the "regular" academic programmes, as well as to establish European/international funding schemes for practice-based research and teaching |
| Kyrgyztan | There is no easy methodology of market research for studying profession's demand and occupational requirements from employers.<br><br>There is no high education connection with VET. |
| Lebanon | Developing an NQF<br><br>The labour market is not well structured and does not provide precise information regarding the needed skills to be developed. Unfortunately, the higher education system is not taking sufficient actions in order to compensate for this. |
| Montenegro | Developing soft skills, transversal skills, enabling practical placements for students |
| Uzbekistan | Teaching competencies necessary for present and future professions |
| Ukraine | Certification of learning outcomes and validation/recognizing informal and non-formal learning when enrolling in higher education programs/to increase the incentives for individuals to invest in training and learn new skills at work;<br>Formulating requirements for competencies and learning outcomes in collaboration with employers |

## 3. Day 1 – Social inclusion strategies in HE

The conference was essentially divided into two days with the two different foci: The first day was a reflection on the 2019 meta-theme: social inclusion strategies in higher education. It began with a brief overview of the main conclusions of the SPHERE activities in 2020 that tackled this issue from different angels:

- **2019 Study Visits:**

Social Inclusion: University policies and practices. Vrije Universiteit VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands, March 25-26,2019

Competence Based Education (CBE): Basics, Perspectives, Implementation', FH Campus Wien, University of Applied Sciences, Austria, 9-10 September 2019

Inclusive mobility: from good intentions to measurable outcomes: Flanders regional/ Vrije Universiteit Brussels, 21-22 November

- **2019 Seminar:**

'Recognition: Implications for cross-border access to higher education and mobility', Technical University of Moldova, Chișinău, Moldova, 10-11 June, 2019

In addition to offering a keynote and a plenary panel session which introduced social inclusion strategies in higher education from the angle of different systems, social and political contexts, the programme invited HERE to explore a specific topic in more depth, in break out groups, moderated by EU experts who had previously participated in SPHERE activities:

- Group 1: Teaching in diverse classrooms *(Moderator: Andy Gibbs, Independent Higher Education Reform Expert, UK)*
- Group 2: Outreach policies and support for underrepresented groups (*Moderator: Valérie Van Hees, Director, SIHO, Belgium*)
- Group 3: Inclusion in internationalisation *(Moderator: Michael Gaebel, EUA/SPHERE Team)*
- Group 4: RPL as a vehicle for including diverse student profiles *(Bryan Maguire, Director of QA, QQI, Ireland)*

## 3.1 Social inclusion strategies in HE – The case of Austria

Helga Posset of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research of Austria provided a keynote for day 1 of the conference that framed approaches to social inclusion policy in higher education and also elicited the specific case of Austria. Social inclusion policy in Austria has been largely guided and inspired by Bologna Process commitments. While the 'social dimension' of Bologna has always been one of the more difficult, less quantifiable areas to pinpoint, the emphasis on developing context specific national strategies and **"**policies that [...] support higher education institutions to fulfil their social responsibility, contributing to a more cohesive and inclusive socially**"** (2018 Paris Declaration) has resonated to a large extent in Austria, which underwent a highly consultative strategy development process between 2015 and 2017. This process required and extensive examination and identification of both underrepresented groups and groups with special needs, which are categorically distinct. It also required examining which measures are already in place at national and institutional level and the extent to which they are systematized, versus transient. Statistical assessment of the student population (for example, probability of student success in the case where students' parents do not have a HE degree) was well examined. Statistics were also broken down by type of HEI (university versus university of applied science, public versus private, etc) to assess possible trends.

As had been stressed in other SPHERE events in 2020, one of the key factors in assessing the impact of social inclusion strategies is the robustness and coherency of data collection and monitoring. Helga

Posset also cited a number of import capacity building projects and measures undertaken at European level (such as the Peer Learning action, funded under Erasmus+, targeted at Bologna country ministries). The Austrian case also demonstrated the important role that national incentivisation and funding can play. As per the Austrian social inclusion strategy, "to ensure the implementation of measures for the social dimension in teaching as well as the inclusion of underrepresented groups into higher education, the federal minister can retain up to 0,5% of the overall university budget". This highly centralized measure has been complemented by funding initiatives to support bottom-up measures at the institutional level, such as a tender for public universities to develop projects for "digitalization & SD"(50 mio.€), the Development and Funding Plan for Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) through to 2023/2024 and quantitative and qualitative enhancement of student support system via extra funding allocation.

Panelists from Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia reacted, affirming the importance of the Bologna Framework and of Peer Learning activities in supporting countries to develop targeted and measurable policies for social inclusion. The challenge, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia, has been in ensuring the university/institutional ownership of such policies and in resourcing implementation.

## 3.2 Teaching in diverse classrooms

One the topics examined in more depth in a break-out groups, 'teaching to diverse classrooms', was also tackled in the study visit to the VU Amsterdam in March 2019 and has consistently risen on the teaching and learning agenda in Europe and in Partner countries. Participants of this break-out group commented that addressing diversity in the classroom is not generally the focus of academic training. Moreover, teaching and learning have a relatively low profile in terms of academic promotion. Another core challenge is that diversity, in some societies, is muted or ill-defined. Disadvantage in the classroom remains subjective - at the discretion of the teacher - and not based in a clear university policy. The group generally agreed that diversity is not an obstacle but rather a resource. The question is how to transform it to the benefit of the classroom. This requires developing an open, communicative culture about what actually happens in the classroom, the diverse nature of the student body and the needs of teaching staff to learn how to channel that diversity.

## 3.3 Outreach policies and support for underrepresented groups

This break-out group examined what was conceived as an integral component to inclusion policies, namely addressing the context and environment in which students live, which may influence their access to HE. This can include their secondary school pathway, their local social environment and the situation/perception of their parents/family. Examples were shared from Flanders, where universities have various campaigns to communicate in particular with low income or migrant families and also to

work concerted with secondary schools on information and bridging programmes. Participants commented on the need for universities to define clearly their outreach strategies and the support services needed to conduct them effectively and ethically, in conjunction with local partners, NGOs, schools and other actors when needed.

## 3.4 Inclusion in Internationalisation

Inclusion in internationalization has been a recurrent theme in 2019, notably because the SPHERE Study on Inclusion in the International Credit Mobility (ICM)[1] has tackled it directly, introducing a theme which is not only very new to Partner countries but also quite novel to many EU countries. The wider umbrella of 'inclusion in internationalisation' as opposed to just inclusive mobility, resonates in many Partner country universities as it is seen as linked to International at Home (IaH) agenda, which is gaining speed. This can cover international teaching, student integration services, language policies and generating an inclusive international learning culture on campuses.

As regards inclusive mobility in particular, Howard Davies (SPHERE) presented, in plenary, the results and recommendations of the SPHERE study and asked the audience for further verification. Amongst the primary questions asked in this study were:

- Is the full range of 'disadvantage' covered by national legislations in the Partner Countries?
- Can disadvantaged students be identified?
- How are they selected by the project partnerships for mobility?
- What obstacles do they face?
- What measures might be taken to raise the level of their participation?

Based on a scan of reports from National Erasmus Plus Offices as well as surveys and interviews of institutions and students, the study found that:

- The E+ definition of disadvantage can only be indicative, as most Partner countries and universities do not have clearly defined definitions of social disadvantage and/or their contexts may require different definitions;
- The definition currently allows Partner and Programme Countries to opt in or out in line with their laws, customs and practices; the principles of the Programme tend to remain open to interpretation;
- The definition can have a perverse effect – it promotes inequity even as it advances the cause of non-discrimination.

Recommendations of the study entailed the following:

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[1] https://supporthere.org/news/erasmus-International-credit-mobility

- All parties should raise awareness of the opportunities that already exist for disadvantaged students to participate in E+.
  *NEOs should:*
  - Inform HEIs of national legislation and E+ principles
  - Explore with ministries possibilities for better alignment
  - Monitor disadvantage, collect data on volume of mobility and on obstacles to mobility
  *HEIs in Partner and Programme Countries should:*
  - Give consideration of disadvantage a prominent place in their internationalisation strategies;
  - Take appropriate initiatives to increase participation;
  - Provide staff development;
  - Commit to collaborative capacity building.
  *The European Commission should consider:*
  - Bringing NEOs and National Agencies (NAs) together to discuss partnership agreements and Organisation Support grants, which is generally under-exploited;
  - Developing clearer guidelines on Operational Support funding that is provided;
  - Incorporating ICM alumni on selection panels;
  - Returning to the target group method adopted in EM2;
  - Covering the additional costs of visa, travel, insurance;
  - Introducing online linguistic support (OLS) to students who may not yet have the appropriate language level.

As many HERE audience members had not dealt specifically with mobility management, nor with ICM, there was some doubt as to what extent addressing a technical issue of this nature in a broader policy forum would be useful. However, HERE expressed considerable interest. The fact the 20 NEO were present, many of which has participated in the study, enhanced the discussion. In addition, 15 participants had been interviewed for the study. It was felt that as social inclusion policies, in general, are very much in the making in many Partner countries, drawing attention to the need to include inclusiveness in internationalisation and mobility is timely. Other participants stressed that capacity in international offices of universities is often weak, hence adding the additional burden on managing outreach and services for the disadvantaged would be very difficult.

## 3.5 RPL as a vehicle for including diverse student profiles

The SPHERE Team presented the results of a follow-up survey on Recognition of Prior Learning - RPL, that was done of HERE participants of the 2020 seminar in Moldova that tackled that topic. The survey was a response to the continued interest of participants to further explore a complex theme. The follow-up survey asked:

- Has your country ratified a regional recognition convention?
- Who is responsible for recognising foreign degrees?

- Who is responsible for recognising foreign credits?
- Do HEIs provide staff development?
- Does your country recognise prior learning?

The survey provided some important trends regarding how recognition is managed (at national and institutional level) and also pointed towards RPL as a potential driver of access to higher education. Eliciting the difficulties around this issue, 11 respondents commented that there is no clear regulation on the recognition of digital online courses provided by accredited institutions and 23 respondents spoke to the general concern and skepticism around micro-credits, nano-masters and badges.

In a break-group on this topic, several participants expressed a general procedural concern around implementing RPL policies. Beyond what are often unclear legal precedents for RPL, there is also a pervading perception that validation of prior learning for academic purposes would violate the integrity of studying at a university in an academic community. This said, participants in the conference expressed considerable interest in the field of micro-credits (see 4.4), as means to generate more labour oriented and flexible study content.

## 4. Day 2: Higher Education provision, skills and labour market needs

Day 2 shifted towards a new topic – Higher education provision, skills and labour market needs. The purpose of exploring this topic was essentially to prime current, pressing policy issues in Partner countries, as a means to prepare a more needs-relevant SPHERE programme for 2020.
As with day 1, the day began with a keynote speech and an opening discussion panel. The objective was to provide a closer look at how this topic has been tackled in the European and Irish policy context and to generate specific questions on how applicable that example may be to Partner countries in which HERE teams are active.

This was followed by an additional set of break-out groups, centred around specific topics:

- Group 1: Student tracking and employability: data, analysis and follow-up *(Moderator: Lewis Purser, Irish University Association)*
- Group 2: Life-long learning and continued professional development *(Moderator: Hanne Smidt, Senior Advisor, EUA)*
- Group 3: Digital provision & new credentials (micro credits) *(Moderator: Ferenc Tatrai, Senior Researcher, EDEN, Hungary)*
- Group 4: Sector skills cooperation and 'green professions' *(Felix Rohn, DG Employment, European Commission)*

## 4.1 A European perspective: Ireland

Lewis Purser of the Irish University Association introduced the theme by placing Irish higher education with the context of economy, population, migration, employment and investment. He noted the significant population growth since the 90's as well as the recent spike in GDP growth, attributed to a large extent to a booming services industry as well as EU membership. According to an Indecon study on the Economic and Social Impact of Irish Universities, the probability of employment with a bachelor's degree is 95% and the wage premium is 38-43% higher. However, with 38,800 additional full-time students expected in Irish higher education by 2030, there are a number of question regarding access to and relevance of HE. Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 also points to the demand for upskilling in large sectors of the existing labour force. This required a concerted response in the university sector, notably by integrating lifelong learning into universities' core missions. The National Skills Council has defined a number of initiatives and investments aimed at aligning HE and skills strategies. This includes:

- Forecasting and planning
- Modularisation, electives, job title/ ISCED mismatch
- Promoting the broad value of university education
- Incorporating transversal/transferable skills and competences
- Flexible provision in a restricted environment
- Student grants and support structures

While exemplary in its policy approach, and in the fact that there is a coherent and efficient dialogue between the university sector and the skills sector, Ireland's model may not be so easily transferable to Partner countries which 1) have an extremely large HE sector and considerable privatization, 2) do not have a national university platform that can speak to and define the role of universities in the skills agenda. This said, specific Irish initiatives can be noted as good practices, notably the multi-stakeholder expert groups and dialogue fora that influence the National Skills Council and the cooperation between Irish universities in tackling common issues related to life-long learning and skills development.

## 4.2 Student tracking and employability: data, analysis and follow-up

Student tracking – through higher education but also into the labour force – is critical to assessing university performance, both in supporting students to successfully complete their degrees and in securing appropriate and timely employment. It requires systematic data collection and strong internal quality management. Student tracking is also a means to generate productive dialogue with the labour market, industry and the public sector, regarding the evolution of graduates in their professional life and social impact of HE graduates.

The Irish case was once again referenced. It consists of:

- An Annual "Graduate Outcomes Survey" report, conducted 9 months after graduation for all students at all levels. This is a common instrument for all HEIs. Data is collated and published by Higher Education Authority (national HE agency). The survey collects information such as:
  - First destinations of graduates (employment in IE/abroad; further studies; work experience schemes; unemployed; not available)
  - Relevance of qualification
  - Graduate salaries
  - Regional distribution of employed graduates
  - Sectoral distribution of employed graduates
  - Migration
  - First destinations of education graduates
- New graduate outcomes longitudinal data, led by the Central Statistics Office, with HEA involvement. This links HE administrative datasets to other administrative datasets, including income, social protection, etc. It covers all publicly funded HEIs
- National employers surveys
- Student Survey of Student Engagement (led by student associations)

These reports provide a collective picture of graduate activity and are essential information for policy making. HERE from partner countries noted one-off or isolated initiatives at the university level to track students and conduct employer surveys, but these tended to lack a coordinated national approach. Participants were very much interested in how student tracking could be better linked to internal QA processes.


## 4.2  Life-long learning and continued professional development

The break-out group on LLL discussed the fact that LLL, while once considered an optional activity for universities, is increasingly being seen as obligatory to meet societal and labour market needs. EUA published a LLF Charter for Universities[2] already over 10 years ago (2008), however the scope of LLL and the source of its provision has evolved rapidly in recent years. Activities that seems to be fairly common are 'Childrens' universities', bridging courses/preparatory courses, continuing education degrees (masters), up-skilling courses, re-skilling courses, senior university courses and personal development courses, the financing of which tends to be limited to private, individual or company investment as opposed to public investment related to the universities' core budget.

The recent migration wave in many EU countries has accentuated the trend of LLL provision: There is currently a wide offer for "short cut" courses for foreign nationals with degrees, targeted language courses for professionals and validation of prior learning (RPL) courses. There is a natural intersection with online provision, which is requiring universities to enhance their digitalisation profiles. There have also been advances on the funding front: The ICDE Lifelong Learning Summit 2019 has shown that there

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[2] https://eua.eu/resources/publications/646:european-universities'-charter-on-lifelong-learning.html

is movement to provide targeted funding for LLL for individuals (examples: Singapore, France, Norway and Denmark) that provides the individual with choice of activity and provider.

Participants discussed how HEIs should consider research, innovation and lifelong learning in a more integrated way. This is inherently linked to reaching social development goals and the SDG2030. In general, much work has to be done to draw attention to the value of Lifelong learning and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), flexible learning paths for lifelong learners and experimental learning. HEIs should define themselves more clearly as the lifelong learning platforms that they are.

## 4.3 Digital provision & new credentials (micro credits)

HERE for the first time explored the fast-evolving field of micro-credentials. The break-out group on this topic provided definitions for what micro-credentials are and how they related to 'short-learning programmes', namely a group of courses with a common subject that can be part of a larger degree. The concept of (digital) micro-credentials emerged to recognise learning outcomes. In HE, the micro-credential is defined as a sub-unit of a credential. It has the potential to offer flexibility and personalisation and be valuable in skilling for the labour market, provided it is recognised. The point was made that MCs should be a means to explore, in a flexible way, the requirements and evidence of learning. In Europe, it is being emphasized that they have to be accredited and measured in (ECTS) credit values.

Micro-credits generate suspicion across Europe and in Partner countries: A survey conducted by the MicroHE Project ([www.microcredentials.eu](www.microcredentials.eu)) shows that institutions lack an understanding of what they are and do not necessarily associate the use of existing recognition tools with them. HERE would be keen to raise awareness for this topic in their respective countries.

## 4.5 Sector skills cooperation and 'green professions'

The break-out group reviewed the main factors driving the emergence of new 'green' professions: automation, digitalisation, artificial intelligence and decarbonisation. It noted that there were major implications for higher education institutions seeking to meet the challenges involved. These implications included the need for clear policy frameworks and funding for curriculum design, as well as the in-service training of careers advisers. The group recognised that it was not easy for HEIs to respond swiftly; there tended to be considerable time lag between the needs of the rapidly changing labour market and the accreditation of newly developed programmes.

Some participants (notably Russia) reported that the HE system was sector-focused and that this helped the setting up of sectoral dialogue covering all the relevant stakeholders. Other participants felt that the principal stimulus for 'green' course development came from research projects, particularly those in ecology.

This was an initial discussion. Participants clearly felt that the topic was important and that it merited some structured follow-up.

## 5. Conclusions

The format of the 2020 HERE Annual Conference has proven to be an effective means to 1) link together thematic issues that have already been explored through seminars, study visit and TAM, 2) allow HERE who may not have participated in previous events to debate these themes together, 3) forecast an upcoming theme and generate valuable feedback for programming HERE activities. It also demonstrated how countries with very diverse policy context for higher education could enhance dialogue around themes of transversal interest.

In addition, the conference allowed important initiatives to be show-cased and promoted (the inclusion and ICM study) and for the European Commission to share important information regarding the future of the Erasmus+ programme, which frames the HERE activities. In this sense, it served both the purpose of debating key HE reform themes and informing the HERE on important developments in EU policies and programmes.