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*Draft Quality
Framework for
Professional Higher
Education Excellence*



PHExcel Report

DRAFT QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR PROFESSIONAL
HIGHER EDUCATION EXCELLENCE

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Contribute to the Validation of the PHExcel Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence

Take part in our validation survey of the quality framework and principles and guidelines for assessing and recognising professional higher education excellence.

The survey addresses our understanding of excellence and the approach adopted in the quality framework.

The survey should not take you more than 20 minutes.

Take part in the survey at
www.phexcel.eurashe.eu/consultation

Introductory Rationale

At present, higher education in Europe is facing the challenge of implementing a process of continuous quality enhancement across educational programmes and organisational structures. This takes on a particular set of characteristics in relation to professional higher education (PHE)¹. Improved performance within PHE is linked to the same quality assurance processes that apply to higher education as a whole. Yet, PHE is equally answerable to the ‘professional’ perspective, and thus finds itself in a state of tension between these two priorities. This tension adds a distinctive dimension to the challenge of quality enhancement within PHE, and poses the interesting question as to whether the concept of excellence might take on slightly different characteristics and emphases when applied to PHE as opposed to higher education in general.

*our
context*

Building upon our specific involvement in the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), we, the PHExcel project partners, have jointly agreed to find a way forward by studying the concept and development of quality models and labels, exploring their capacity to recognise excellence in PHE while, at the same time, re-asserting our need of a common basis for quality assurance across European higher education through the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Undoubtedly certain features of a general nature – e.g. the professionally orientated content of programmes – may unify the institutions engaged in PHE. At the same time there is a huge variety amongst the institutions offering PHE – in terms of e.g. programmes, disciplines, missions, settings and even quality. As a result of this diversity, the need has become evident for a quality framework that defines the shared features of excellent practice across PHE, and which offers a common set of tools for identifying and assessing practices that embody excellence in PHE.

The **PHExcel** initiative is an EU-funded project on **Testing the Feasibility of a Quality Label for Professional Higher Education Excellence** coordinated by EURASHE, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, the representative of higher education institutions offering professionally orientated programmes, with partners from 4 sectors of higher education, the Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen (AEC), the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA), the SPACE Network for Business Studies and Languages (SPACE), The University of Nottingham (UON) representing the European Federation of Nurse Educators (FINE), and 2 partners providing structural support to the initiative, Jagiellonian University in Krakow (UJ), and the Knowledge Innovation Centre (KIC).²

*our
project*

¹ See definition of PHE in chapter 1. Professional Higher Education Excellence.

² For more information on the PHExcel project see www.phexcel.eurashe.eu

The objectives of the PHExcel project are to:

- Survey quality tools that respond to the identified characteristics of PHE;
- Propose a concept of PHE excellence;
- Support PHE in achieving excellence with an assessment methodology;
- Validate the proposed quality framework by conducting pilot tests;
- Build consensus through consultations with key stakeholders;
- Deploy PHE excellence with an implementation roadmap;
- Mainstream the concept of PHE excellence in Europe.

*our
objective*

Our overall aim within the PHExcel project is to support, develop and enhance excellence in PHE in Europe. To this end, we propose **an enhancement process leading to the recognition of excellence in PHE**, which supplements existing quality assurance and accreditation procedures.

Excellence is indeed a ‘hot topic’ in higher education worldwide. It is used in funding schemes by several authorities and its relevance has risen in recent years through (international) rankings and sectorial initiatives such as quality labels.

The aim of recognising excellence in higher education is to show the uniqueness of the institutions or programmes under consideration in terms of what they achieve at an ‘excellent’ level. The entire process serves to modernise and improve the higher education provision for learners. Excellent approaches in one unit serve as an example for other units, nationally and internationally, ideally in a trans-sectorial setting, irrespective of the teaching subject. Concretely, excellence in PHE should be enhanced from the so-called short-cycle higher education programmes at level 5 to the so-called ‘practice doctorates’ or ‘industrial doctorates’ at level 8 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The report on *Quality Tools for Professional Higher Education Review and Improvement*³ is the result of the first phase of the project. The report is made up of a typology of quality tools, a first gap analysis towards PHE characteristics and a second gap analysis towards the ESG. The report identifies the gaps in coverage from the side of the quality tools studied towards the identified elements of PHE.

*our
methodology*

Following consultations and debates with experts in the field,⁴ we have now developed the underlying *Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence* as a response to gaps identified in the aforementioned report. We had three meetings with experts representing major stakeholders in European higher education and quality assurance. A PHExcel *Briefing Paper on Excellence*⁵ presents the state of the art on the topic of excellence and its assessment and served as the basis for discussions in the expert group.

³ (PHExcel) Jørgensen M. D., Kristensen R. S., Wipf A., Delplace S., (2014), *Quality Tools For Professional Higher Education Review And Improvement*, Brussels, ISBN: 978-99957-843-0-0, available at: www.phexcel.eurashe.eu/publications

⁴ The full composition of the expert group and a list of its meetings are available in annex.

⁵ (PHExcel) Wipf A., Cloet J., Delplace, S., (2014), *Briefing Paper on Excellence*, available at: www.phexcel.eurashe.eu/publications.

The present *Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence* has three parts:

*our
framework*

1. Professional Higher Education Excellence: defining PHE and excellence in PHE;
2. Characteristics of Excellence: presenting domains and characteristics of excellence in PHE;
3. Assessing and Recognising Excellence: introducing the assessment methodology of excellence in PHE.

Finally, we present in a separate document the *Principles and Guidelines for Assessing and Recognising PHE Excellence*⁶ that include the practicalities of the assessment methodology, such as the format to submit a claim for excellence through a case study of excellence and the method for the selection of a team of international peers for the site visit.

The draft quality framework is now going into a construct validation and reality testing, which is both theoretical and practical. The theoretical validation will take the form of an open public consultation.⁷ A focus group workshop will also be organised in order to gather feedback from the wider higher education community. The practical validation will test the draft quality framework in four pilot reviews of institutions or programmes in Europe.

*our
perspectives*

Finally after considering the outcomes of the validation process, and in parallel to a 'market' analysis, partners will come together to discuss, in very practical terms, the final recommendations of the project including the options for the deployment of the quality framework and the assessment methodology.

We will present the final *Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence*, together with an outline for future actions, to the wider higher education community during the PHEExcel Conference in London (United Kingdom) on 18-19 November 2015.⁸

We look forward to your feedback,
The PHEExcel consortium, January 2015

⁶ (PHEExcel) Ebert L., (2015), Principles and Guidelines for Assessing and Recognising PHE Excellence, available at: www.phexcel.eurashe.eu/publications.

⁷ For more information on the public consultation, and to take part, see www.phexcel.eurashe.eu/consultation.

⁸ For more information on the conference, and to take part, see www.phexcel.eurashe.eu/conference.

1. Professional Higher Education Excellence

Professional higher education (PHE) is a form of higher education that offers a particularly intense integration with the world of work in all its aspects, including teaching, learning, research and governance and at all levels of the overarching Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area. Its function is to diversify learning opportunities, enhance the employability of graduates, offer qualifications and stimulate innovation, for the benefit of learners and society. The world of work includes all enterprises, civil society organisations, and the public sector. The intensity of integration with the world of work is manifested by a strong focus on the application of learning achievements. This approach involves combining phases of work and study, a concern for employability, cooperation with employers, the use of practice-relevant knowledge and use-inspired research.⁹

There is, in Europe, a large variety of institutions delivering PHE and the boundaries within higher education between so-called academic and professional higher education are permeable and dynamic. This blurring of boundaries will continue to be influenced by the importance given to employability by the entire higher education community.

Whilst remaining similar to the needs and issues of higher education generally, those faced by institutions offering PHE take a distinctive form. This is similarly true of research, a fundamental component of all higher education, which, for PHE, may emphasise but is not necessarily confined to applied research. The element that is therefore most characteristic of PHE and that meaningfully unifies diverse institutions, schools, faculties, departments, units, subjects and programmes, is its intense focus upon, and integration with, the world of work.

Because PHE is not limited to training relevant only to contemporary professional needs and narrow solutions for immediate employment requirements, its intense focus upon the world of work does not prevent it from providing a wide range of transferable skills – indeed, its intimate connection with professional environments and attitudes makes for a particularly rich range of professionally relevant transferable skills.

An understanding of excellence specific to PHE must, by definition, be based on the cornerstone of its intense integration with the world of work. A sense of professional value is critical when considering the concept of PHE excellence. It is about integrating professional aspirations and ethos with those of knowledge acquisition and self-growth applicable to any learner group. Learners assimilate these through their learning and through their realisation that the professional world is in both the classroom and the (work) placement – i.e. that they are learning *for* a profession but also learning *in* a profession.

The translation of this understanding into practice is therefore crucial to the definition and adoption of one's own strategy for excellence, and ultimately for its implementation. This extends the concept of excellence into that of 'contextual excellence'. This approach reflects the necessary dynamic contextual approach within the higher education provision and aims at recognising a supreme fitness for purpose within the delivery of PHE.

⁹ HAPHE, (2014), Definition of professional higher education, available at: www.haphe.eurashe.eu

Our aim is to enhance the provision of PHE in most institutions and programmes based on the impact that the PHE approach has on the education experience and future prospects of learners and, in turn, on society as a whole, by engaging the entire higher education community in an evolving debate about the nature of excellence, especially in terms of its relevance to the world of work.

2. Characteristics of Excellence

Because of its central importance, discussed above, the intense integration with the world of work is the main aspect upon which attention is focused throughout this quality framework, and it is systematically integrated in the table of domains and characteristics of excellence underneath. First, we highlight three key domains of PHE that are each divided into sub-domains (two, five and three of these respectively). Second, we propose a set of thirty characteristics of excellence, ranging across these domains and sub-domains, addressing PHE's intense integration with the world of work.

Excellence is not a static concern, nor are these characteristics of excellence intended to amount to a closed or fixed enumeration of the ways it is manifested in PHE. Instead, the idea is that by proposing a *claim for excellence* a participating unit (be it an institution, a faculty, a department or a programme) should develop a case study of excellent practice, which is mapped against the table of domains, sub-domains and characteristics of excellence. However this claim for excellence should not be restricted to these characteristics; the claim for excellence develops its own relevant indicators, in a move to engage PHE in further developing excellence and excellent practice.

If an intense integration with the world of work is the main aspect through which excellence in PHE is recognised, the corollary is that this intense integration should be, ideally, an element present throughout the work of a unit, a transversal strategy. At the same time, this does not disqualify a stand-alone strategy feeding into all aspects of the provision of higher education. Therefore, the first domain of excellence is that of *strategy and policy*. Although, because of starting with this domain the characteristics are formulated on institutional level, they should also be applicable on the levels of faculty, department and programme.

Teaching and learning is the second domain of excellence. The mix of theory and practice is at the centre of the characteristics of teaching and learning. Therefore the importance of the interaction with the world of work is included in constructing the curriculum, the learning methodology and the requirements concerning the teaching staff. The positions of institutions engaged in PHE as regards this integration with the world of work do vary, however, from those with little engagement with stakeholders to those achieving a full cooperation, where an equal participation between academia and the world of work, in curriculum development for example, can be observed.

Naturally, one specific aspect when dealing with quality frameworks and, especially, excellence is research. Concentrating on the intense integration with the world of work enables us to see how research, when defined broadly as in the Dublin Descriptors, is of fundamental relevance across all disciplines of PHE. *Research, development and innovation* in certain subjects, such as the humanities, social sciences or the arts, may take different forms and be manifested in different types of output, from scientific, medical or technological disciplines. Yet its importance in ensuring that higher education does not merely follow professional needs but helps to shape them is every bit as relevant. Highlighting excellent practice in this area opens up new opportunities for organisations and individuals. This understanding of research also contains specific characteristics not linked directly to the integration with the world of work, such as the involvement of students in the research process, and the importance of the cross-fertilisation of teaching and learning and research.

Our approach is aimed at supplementing the (inter)national approaches to excellence. PHExcel proposes an approach that is reflective on the concept of excellence and that empowers participating units to critically think of their own situation and to recognise their excellent practice in accordance with identified characteristics of excellence.

Domains of Excellence		Characteristics of Excellence
Policy and strategy	Policy and strategy integration	<p>Institutional policies and strategies are defined in collaboration with stakeholders and through engagement with relevant professional regulatory bodies and political authorities.</p> <p>The policy and strategy is driven by structural involvement with the world of work and wider society.</p> <p>The policy and strategy is driven by an active and long-term engagement with the community.</p> <p>The policy and strategy is supportive of research and innovation and rewards these wherever they emerge in the institution.</p>
	Objectives and outcomes	<p>The objectives and outcomes of the policies on teaching and learning, and research, development and innovation are focused upon the needs and future developments of the world of work and wider society.</p> <p>Objectives and outcomes focus on the development of skills and competences that enhance employability, the societal contribution and personal development of graduates.</p> <p>There are structural ways in which the world of work is included that have an impact on teaching and learning, and on research, development and innovation.</p> <p>Institutions set up, maintain and constantly develop structural community partnerships.</p>
Teaching and learning	Teaching and learning strategy	<p>The world of work is structurally integrated into the learning design and its implementation.</p> <p>The learning and its assessment are attuned to the nature and practices of the professional environment.</p> <p>Learning outcomes and the assessment and teaching methodologies are aligned with the diverse professional and personal needs of different profiles of learners, including lifelong learners.</p> <p>Students, teachers and practitioners contribute collaboratively to the future development of professional practice.</p>
	Approaches to curriculum development	<p>Curricula are developed, reviewed and sustained in a strategic collaboration with stakeholders, such as with the world of work, students and staff members, taking into consideration local and international contexts, and future trends.</p> <p>Curricula and the world of work inform and enhance each other mutually and dynamically.</p> <p>Curriculum development is informed by research in collaboration with the professions.</p>

Domains of Excellence		Characteristics of Excellence
	Content for teaching and learning	<p>The content for teaching and learning develops graduates well prepared for the professional field by achieving a range of transferable competences and by responding to the changing needs for skills of the professions.</p> <p>The learning content is facilitating the realisation of the programme vision, aims and objectives in its link to the professions and is recognised as such by stakeholders.</p> <p>The learning content integrates theory and practice, the latest research, trends and references the world of work and academia.</p> <p>The learning experience is challenging academically and professionally, enabling students to achieve their learning outcomes.</p>
	Learning environment	<p>The learning environment is congruent with the programme vision, aims, objectives, methodologies and contents.</p> <p>The learning environment enables learners to move in and out of the professional setting.</p> <p>The learning environment stimulates learning in, and for, practice including robust processes for preparation, participation, assessment and evaluation.</p> <p>The team creates the conditions for all students to achieve the learning outcomes.</p>
	Programme team(s)	<p>At the programme level, the team demonstrates a blend of academic and professional expertise recognised by both parties.</p> <p>The team engages with and is informed by international research, trends and references from the world of work and academia.</p>
Research, development and innovation (RDI)	RDI agenda	<p>Research, development and innovation agendas and those of the world of work inform and enhance each other mutually and dynamically to meet their strategic needs and those of wider society.</p>
	RDI process	<p>Researchers, developers and innovators work creatively at the interface between theory and practice and collaboratively with stakeholders.</p> <p>The process of research, development and innovation incorporates knowledge co-creation and transfer in a sustainable manner, which is recognised by stakeholders.</p>
	RDI outputs and outcomes	<p>Research, development and innovation outcomes have a sustained track record of local, regional, national and/or international impact.</p> <p>Research, development and innovation outcomes have an impact that challenges the practice of internal and external stakeholders.</p>

3. Assessing and Recognising Excellence

Through its quality framework and assessment methodology, PHExcel aims at providing a stimulus for the reflection on one's own context and excellence.

Recognising excellent practice is inherently bound up with exercising a judgement. The approach we take relies on the definition of one's own contextual excellence and its effective implementation. Based on this, and in respect of institutional discretion, it is up to the applicant unit (institution, faculty, department or programme) to provide proof of its excellent practice by whatever criteria it feels to be contextually most relevant, and not only to rely on the examples of possible characteristics given in the table.

The approach taken promotes the contextual dimension of excellence, and at the same time, acknowledges the various cultural approaches towards the concept of labels. Therefore, although the entire process of making a claim for excellence can culminate in the award of a certificate, it does not have to – it can also remain an entirely internal exercise conducted by an education unit in order to develop certain characteristics pertaining to excellence in PHE.

The proposed approach aims at testing a unit's *claim for excellence*, it embraces a few basic principles, such as the following:

- Participating units must have been accredited and must be able to submit their recent self-evaluation report that has formed the basis for the last awarded accreditation – in countries where accreditation is not carried out or is still in the process of being implemented, units legally operating and recognised as such by their authorities may take part in a PHExcel assessment;
- A unit uses a case study to showcase its excellence. This *case study of excellent practice* is described with reference to the PHExcel quality framework and shows how the case chosen is exemplary for the processes applied throughout the unit in focus. Units can choose to refer to one or all three domains of excellence of the quality framework. An individual domain may be the topic of special focus, but it is still expected that all three domains should be referred to in a PHExcel assessment;
- The case study will be subject to scrutiny through a one-day site visit by a *team of international peers* who enter into a conversation with staff, students and any relevant stakeholders. During the visit, the unit's representatives, by presenting the case study, can demonstrate the excellence of the unit and further explain their claim in an open and conversational manner with the visiting team;
- The case study and the conversations will relate to the quality framework and aim at a *group-self-assessment* in which the international peers will take the role of a coach or facilitator rather than evaluator;
- Together with the unit representatives, the international peers will arrive at a shared view on the case study and its value as a showcase for the *continuous enhancement* of the unit's professional excellence profile;

- The participating unit will receive a comprehensive confidential written report by the visiting team. It will conclude with a section of *commendations and recommendations*.

The full details of the assessment methodology are given in the *Principles and Guidelines for Assessing and Recognising PHE Excellence*, which provide an overview of the entire process and are aimed at both the participating unit and the team of international peers.

Expert Group Composition & Meetings

The expert group was composed of:

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The expert group met on:

23-24 June 2014 in Brussels (Belgium) discussing the concept of excellence and excellence in PHE. These topics were addressed with an overview of the topic of excellence in higher education. Experts discussed, amongst others, the development of international rankings (of excellence) and the use of excellence in funding mechanisms.

9-10 September 2014 in Brussels (Belgium) further discussing the concept of excellence, especially in the view of assessing excellence and criteria linked to this assessment. The expert group went on to identify characteristics of excellence and considered criteria used in frameworks and tools addressing quality and excellence in higher education.

1-2 December 2014 in Amsterdam (Netherlands) discussing a specific methodology to assess excellence in PHE. The final meeting of the expert group provided the opportunity to come to a coherent and appropriate quality framework for the enhancement of excellence in PHE.

PHExcel aims to support institutions offering professional higher education across Europe to improve their PHE performance. It plans to achieve this by providing them with a Quality Framework that defines best practice in the professional elements of their processes.

The present draft quality framework for professional higher education excellence is the second step on this journey and provides an overview of what is excellence in PHE and how to assess and recognise it.