



SPHERE 2025 Annual Conference

2-3 October 2025

Bucharest, Romania

Erasmus+
Enriching lives, opening minds.

**SPH
ERE**
Centralised Support
to the Network
of Higher Education
Reform Experts

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SPHERE 2025 Annual Conference & Bologna Process Symposium

Programme Overview

1 Oct	Morning	Arrival
	Afternoon	Bologna Process Symposium
		<i>Dinner</i>
2 Oct	Morning	Bologna Process Symposium
		<i>Lunch</i>
	Afternoon	SPHERE Annual Conference
		<i>Dinner</i>
3 Oct	Morning	SPHERE Annual Conference
	Afternoon	<i>Cultural visit / off</i>

Venue

Hall, 2nd floor, Central Library.

National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest (POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Splaiul Independenței 313, District 6
Bucharest 060042, Romania

About the SPHERE Annual Conference

The conference will reflect on the activities and achievement of NEOs, HERE and SPHERE in 2025, and also discuss priorities for 2026, in view of the national reform processes and needs of the HERE countries, and in consideration of ongoing and forthcoming European Union higher education policy.

Objectives:

- Reflect on SPHERE 2025: activities and achievements on themes which have been or will be addressed: AI, micro-credentials, sustainability, and STEM.
- Foster peer learning and networking.
- Professional development of NEO and HEREs: Share strategies and good practices
- EU update: Present and discuss EU policy updates relevant to higher education, with regards to the Competitiveness Compass, the Union of Skills, the STEM Education Strategy, and the proposal for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)

Programme | SPHERE Annual Conference

2 October 2025

(Bucharest time)

13:00 | *Registration and welcome lunch (Hall, 2nd floor, Central Library)*

14:00 | **Session 1: SPHERE activities 2025: Key achievements, and lessons learned**

SPHERE team introduction followed by break-out sessions

Participants will discuss SPHERE's activities in 2025 in break-out sessions. There will be two groups each focussing on one of the 2025 SPHERE themes:

- **The role of AI in higher education:** exploring how artificial intelligence is shaping teaching, learning, and administration (Room: 2.1 Central Library)
- **Transformative potential of micro-credentials:** examining their impact on lifelong learning, recognition, and employability (Room 2.2 Central Library)

Participants will share and discuss their experiences of Technical Assistance Missions (TAMs), SPHERE events and Erasmus+ and other projects, and reflect on lessons learned, and the scope for continuation and follow-up.

15:30 | **Session 2: SPHERE Third Mission report: Current Trends in Higher Education and Its Third Mission: Partnering for Social and Economic Development in HERE Countries**

Speakers: [Howard Davies](#). SPHERE team (Online)

Presentation of the report followed by Q&A and discussions.

Universities see contribution to society, the "Third Mission" as of high importance, in addition and linked to conducting research and educating students. For European universities, it is the most important mission goal, before innovation and internationalisation (Trends 2024).

SPHERE activities have addressed the Third Mission on several occasions, notably at the May 2024 Seminar in Uzbekistan. To underline its importance, the annual SPHERE publication 2024 has been dedicated to the matter. In addition to desk research, it included national multi-stakeholder focus groups and an online survey. The report examines how universities contribute to local and national development in HERE countries, exploring strategies for engagement, stakeholder involvement, and governance. It provides a resource and vademecum for the NEOs and the HERE community, but also addresses the European Commission and beyond, the wider public of interested stakeholders, i.e. academics, students, researchers, administrators, policy makers and employers committed to socio-economic and community interventions. The session will highlight practical insights and recommendations for enhancing the third mission, showing how institutions can strengthen societal impact at both policy and institutional levels. Participants are invited to engage in discussion and Q&A, reflecting on how these findings can inform higher education practices and policies in their own contexts.

Discussion questions:

- *Is a national strategy of the Third Mission necessary? If so, how prescriptive should it be?*
 - *How can institutional governance best respond to community needs?*
 - *What factors are relevant to an institution's audit of its community-focused activities*
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16:15 | *Break*

16:45 | **Session 3: Case studies: HERE synergies with EU projects for greater impact**

- *Elizabeth Colucci. SPHERE Team (chair)*
- *Khabibullo Nosirov. HERE Uzbekistan*
- *Vanja Drljević. NEO Montenegro*

Presentations and discussion with the audience

Elizabeth Colucci will introduce the forthcoming 2025 SPHERE publication on policy reform impact in HERE countries. Building on the recent survey, she will reflect on how HEREs and NEOs contribute to national and institutional policy development, often in synergy with Erasmus+ and other EU instruments. The session will underline the importance of capturing “impact stories” that trace how HERE activities catalyse change, showcase successes, and inform both national and EU policymakers.

Following the introduction, a panel of HEREs will showcase 2 good practices identified through the survey. Each presentation will highlight concrete examples of how participation in SPHERE events and activities has influenced national reforms, projects, or institutional initiatives, illustrating the real impact of HERE engagement.

A Q&A will give participants the chance to share perspectives and expectations for the publication.

17.30 | *Closing of the day*

19:00 | *Dinner offered by the SPHERE Team. Restaurant Pescarus, Alea Pescarus nr. 1,*

3 October 2025

(Bucharest time)

08:30 | Registration (Hall, 2nd floor, Central Library)

9:00 | **Session 4: Peer to peer - Professional development sessions for National Erasmus Offices & HERE Teams**

Break-out sessions, co-chaired by SPHERE team and HEREs followed by a short plenary debrief.

Three breakout groups dedicated to peer-to-peer professional development for National Erasmus Offices (NEOs) and Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs). Participants will exchange experiences and lessons and explore good practice and concrete approaches and strategies for improving their contribution and support to higher education reform, as well as identifying the need for further professional development.

- **Breakout 1 for HEREs: Strategic Planning** – How are HEREs involved in and contribute to the strategic planning, for the work of the HERE Teams, and but also for the actions and goals of the national workplans.
- **Breakout 2 for HEREs: Enhancing Impact** – Often our work focusses on the implementation of an event, or the publishing of a report, and little attention is given to thinking about impact and impact assessment? HEREs will exchange on the actual impact of their work, how they assess it, and what could be improved, also to boost the visibility, reach, and effectiveness of HERE activities.
- **Breakout 3 for NEOs: Good and Not-So-Good Practices** – NEOs share examples of approaches and techniques that worked well, but also those which did not. This may consider content issues, events, working with HERE teams, but also administrative, managerial and financial issues.

10:00 | **Session 5: New European Union policy and programme developments** *(info session)*

Speakers: [Antoaneta Irikova](#), European Commission (Online)

Presentation followed by Q&A

This session will focus on the latest European Union policy and programme developments relevant to NEOs and HEREs and provide participants with insights into current priorities. Europe's future prosperity depends on its ability to remain globally competitive while equipping its citizens with the skills needed to adapt to rapid technological, social, and economic change. At the heart of this vision is the Competitiveness Compass, the European Commission's tool for monitoring Europe's performance in critical areas such as skills, innovation, research, and digital transition. Closely linked to this is the Union of Skills, a new initiative to ensure that education and training systems anticipate labour market needs and support lifelong learning for all. For higher education and research, these initiatives signal an intensifying focus on how universities and knowledge institutions contribute to Europe's competitiveness, resilience, and strategic autonomy. They underline the role of education not only in fostering academic excellence, but also in driving innovation, addressing skills shortages, and preparing graduates for the green and digital transitions.

Key themes will include:

- [Competitiveness Compass](#) & [Union of Skills](#)
 - Reflection on [STEM Education Strategy](#) – in view also of the forthcoming university visit
 - Implications for the next [Multiannual Financial Programme 2028-2034](#) and opportunities for higher education and research
 - [Enlargement](#) and possible implications for SPHERE
 - EU New pact for the Mediterranean (if published)
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11:00 | Break

11:30 | **Session 6: What SPHERE should do in the future?**

This interactive session invites participants to shape the future directions of SPHERE.

- **Introduction & Topic Selection (5 minutes)**
The SPHERE team will open the session with a brief introduction and a live poll to identify the top three priority themes of interest to the group. These themes will serve as the focus for collaborative brainstorming.
- **Small Group Brainstorming (40 minutes)**
Participants will split into thematic groups according to their chosen priority topics. Each group will explore:
 - Why this topic matters: What are the challenges and opportunities that make it essential for the next phase of SPHERE?
 - How to address it: Concrete ideas, potential actions, and resources needed.
 - A roadmap forward: Key milestones, partnerships, and expected outcomes.
- **Debrief & Open Discussion (20 minutes)**
A rapporteur from each group will present the main outcomes of their discussion to the plenary. This will be followed by an open exchange across groups, to highlight connections, cross-cutting insights, and areas for collaboration.

By the end of the session, participants will have co-created a set of strategic directions that reflect collective priorities and provide a roadmap for SPHERE's next phase.

12:45 | **Session 7: Outlook and closure**

The session briefly summarizes the main outcomes of the event, highlights the remaining SPHERE activities for 2025 (HERE meeting, events, TAM), and also provides some reflections on the next round starting in 2026.

13:00 *Farewell lunch Afternoon:*

Tour to the Palace of Parliament

