

Conference on Bachelor-level degrees

- 1 My first words are to thank the Finish Ministry for the invitation to participate in this Conference under the Bologna follow-up process. It is gladly that, on behalf of the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences, I start by bringing here some thoughts that, for a few years, we have been developing on the theme of diversification in higher education.
2. In its role to help formulate policy on higher education, by bringing together the voices of higher education institutions, the Confederation adopted a statement on diversification in 1996, following a thorough consultation with the member Rectors' Conferences. It may be worth to recall here one key idea pointed in that statement: diversification, as a concept in higher education policy, is an inescapable way to cope with new challenges and demands on institutions.

One such challenge is massification and the corresponding implication that the expectations, interests and capabilities of applicants to enter higher education are not homogeneous (many are looking for better prospects of a well paid job; some are seeking a broadly based education to be prepared to the changing profile of the labour market; a few are even looking for a specific scientific activity).

Another problem is the fact that half-life time of specific knowledge is decreasing quickly and new knowledge is developed very rapidly, and also that many developments occur at the interfaces of traditional disciplines. These changes imply that specific knowledge in teaching

contents is losing relative value as compared with the basic knowledge and the methodological skills which enable and facilitate self-learning.

Also, the new expectations and demands of society towards higher education institutions, relating to the envisaged contributions of higher education towards economic development and social inclusion, are strongly linked to the needs of the labour market. However, as said in the Confederation's statement, "there are differences in this context between short-terms requests, which depend on actual conjunctural developments as well as on fluctuations of the markets, and long-term trends towards higher formal qualifications as a basis for reducing labour market risks for the individual".

Higher education institutions can not avoid to take into consideration such diverse demands of their respective environments when defining their specific profiles in research, teaching, continuing education and services. As a matter of fact, the way to cope with these challenges, as said earlier, is diversification, by promoting variety, flexibility and the possibility to combine courses and programmes. And the discussions on bachelor-level degrees will inevitably take place in this context.

3. When discussing the structures of degrees in higher education, another important point, advanced by the Bologna Declaration, is the question of relevance to the European labour market for the degree awarded after the first cycle, as an appropriate level of qualification. I would like to propose a look at "relevance" from two different angles.

On one side, we must consider the relevance of degrees, of programmes and of exit points in programmes for new entrants into

higher education and for students along the learning process. This has to do with the diversity of expectations, intents and capabilities of the students and the emergence of new publics into higher education. The mismatch between these elements and the way some educational programmes are designed and delivered is causing huge drop-out rates and consequently dissatisfaction and bad use of the available resources. It is therefore necessary to validate studies at different exit points, with or without a formal degree, besides other forms for credit transfer and accumulation. As a consequence, the debate on the bachelor-level degrees will very probably also bring into the discussion the question of shorter studies leading to a diploma instead of a degree.

A second issue is the relevance to the labour market, as expressed in the Bologna Declaration. Here, it is necessary to consider both the point of view of employers — the expectations of the labour market itself — and the point of view of higher education institutions, i.e., how they see and interpret the labour market needs (on a larger term basis, as it is characteristic of higher education). On this respect, it is important to stress that the institutions should have the possibility of initiating themselves the diversity of solutions to answer the labour market needs, within the framework of their institutional autonomy, in a bottom-up approach, rather than having the solutions forced upon them by top-down State regulations.

Another point to underline is that both the short and long-term visions must be pondered when considering relevance. In particular, it should be emphasised that the relevance to the labour market does not necessarily imply a professional bachelor: indeed, a sound scientific

bachelor degree can be of great interest not only for further specialised studies but also to employers and for many jobs where transferable skills are as important as specific knowledge.

4. These and other concerns are addressed by the Conference programme. The expectations on the conclusions from today's and tomorrow's discussions are great, as important inputs to the Salamanca Convention. In reality, the objective of the Salamanca meeting to produce a public statement on how higher education institutions see their future and how they wish that future to be shaped, while reaffirming their commitment in favour of the European space for higher education and putting forward a concise platform of actions to set it up, will only be possible by building upon the results of the numerous studies and thematic seminars which are being organised as part of the Bologna process.

So, the motivation for an open and profound debate is strong. We are all aware that higher education systems (and particularly higher education institutions) live challenging times and that the paths to follow are not easy. But it is reassuring, somehow, to know that higher education institutions, the national Rector's Conferences and the emerging European University Association (which will very soon substitute the CRE and the Confederation) will unsparingly provide their critical but constructive support to the objectives of the Bologna Declaration, namely in what concerns the convergence to a common, but flexible, qualifications framework.

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