

CURRENT TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EU COUNTRIES

1. The framework for current trends

It is not possible nowadays to discuss what is happening in Europe regarding higher education without referring to the Bologna process. Indeed, in the pledge to reform the structure of higher education systems in a convergent way, the Bologna Declaration is providing the framework for the discussions and changes occurring in every of the signatory countries. The process following Bologna is also allowing for the opportunity and the means to study in greater detail the current trends in each country.

The contents and significance of the Bologna Declaration have been thoroughly discussed in different forums and are not the object of this presentation. A brief reference will however be made to what it means and implies for higher education institutions and how it is developing as a process.

2. Trends in national systems

After the Sorbonne Declaration and the following discussions on the harmonisation of the structures of higher education systems it was soon evident that there was a lack of reliable information regarding the situation and the evolution of the national systems, which raised big difficulties in relation to the goal of achieving compatibility between systems.

The Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences, in cooperation with CRE and the financial support of the European Commission, launched a study on *Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education* with the aim to produce a report with a dynamic picture of higher education in the European Union in time to be presented to the Bologna meeting in June 1999. The Trends Report had a significant impact on the discussions in Bologna and still constitutes the best available reference on the subject.

The main findings from the study, showing the main tendencies in higher education within the European Union, may be summarised as follows:

- There is an extreme diversity in degree structures, expressing the well known richness of European higher education variety but raising serious problems of readability and comparability of degrees;
- there is no convergence towards a strict 3-5-8 pattern of degrees, as had been wrongly assumed in several instances;
- a reasonable degree of convergence was found on total duration of studies for the master degree at around five years;
- a convergent set of reforms were recently introduced or are in progress, namely in what concerns a move towards shorter studies, the introduction of earlier exit points through 2-tier degree structures, progress on credit systems, on more autonomy and accountability and on external evaluation, or the blurring of borders between university and non-university sectors;
- there is a reasonable awareness, both at ministerial and institutional levels, on internal issues, like those related to compatibility, access to the labour market or mobility, but not so much on external issues such as the competitiveness of European higher education systems or transnational education.

An important conclusion is that no ready-to-use external model can be easily imported, meaning that Europe must develop its own approach to suit its specific cultural and educational needs.

For lack of time and resources, the study only included the EU Member States. The Confederation argued for its extension to all the signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration and helped in the launching of a second phase for the project, running under the coordination of the Finish NARIC and again with the financial support of the European Commission, with the objective to widen and develop the former study and update the information on the EU countries. A report will be produced in time for the Prague meeting.

3. The European dimension of higher education

The European dimension of higher education, under the principle of subsidiary, is limited mainly to cooperation and exchange of information and good practices, since the competences on the education systems in each Member State are strictly national. The direct impact on the structure of the education systems is therefore small, although some very powerful instruments — like networking and mobility — were developed with the support of the European Commission programmes, contributing to a greater awareness of the common problems and challenges to be faced. This mutual knowledge and understanding represents an important first step for the establishment of a meaningful european dimension.

The Bologna Declaration, by going much beyond subsidiary, represents a boost to the european dimension of higher education. Indeed, by lining up their national policies, with specific goals and a time span, the signatory ministers gave a big step forward in Bologna, opening real

prospects for greater coherence, readability and comparability in the structures of higher education systems; and by doing it on free will, without the imposition from any European authorities, they safeguarded national specificities and competences, and the autonomy of institutions, since the final decisions will always be taken at national level. One must notice, however, that the commitment by the signatory countries creates in practice a strong pressure on national systems and actors to reflect and act on the organisation of higher education with the objective to make national systems comparable with a common system of reference.

This last point is very important for higher education institutions. The Bologna Declaration does not intend to impose one single common system to all countries and institutions. On the contrary, Bologna intends to safeguard the rich diversity of higher education in Europe, while vouching the adoption of a framework of reference for readable and comparable degrees, thus providing a common yardstick. The idea is so simple and, simultaneously, so powerful and far-reaching that no system or institution will be able to ignore it without the risk of isolation.

Bologna is becoming a dynamic process, that can be felt almost everywhere. It is already apparent that the Bologna process is originating a significant degree of convergence.

4. The Bologna process

We have seen that the Bologna process is the real framework for the European dimension of higher education. A brief reference will now be made on how it is developing in its objectives to construct a European Higher Education Area.

The signatory ministers committed themselves to launch in every country a dynamic process towards convergence. Main action is really necessary at national level, because the reforms are to be designed and adopted by each country, under the national competences. Multiple initiatives are under way in most countries, showing an active involvement of governments, rectors' conferences and individual institutions in studying and discussing the implications of the Bologna process in their particular country or type of institution. Several countries are considering or planning legislative reforms, some already in progress, confirming the trends already identified in the study mentioned earlier.

Some form of coordination is however necessary, since many issues and concerns are more or less the same in different countries and require a common study. Consequently, the ministers agreed to pursue the ways of intergovernmental cooperation and established a specific follow-up structure with a mandate to prepare the Prague Conference and to facilitate and coordinate the action needed to advance the goals of the Bologna Declaration. The follow-up structure is based on a Contact Group

with a consultative role, consisting of representatives of the 29 signatory countries, and a smaller Follow-up Group, more operational, comprising the countries holding the EU Presidency in the period from Bologna to Prague (Finland, Portugal, France, Sweden), the host country (the Czech Republic), the European Commission, the Confederation and CRE.

At the initiative of the Contact and Follow-up Groups, an agenda of activities at European level was adopted, whose main events are:

- a series of studies and projects to serve as preparatory steps for the next stages in the process, dealing with transnational education, accreditation, the implementation of the Diploma Supplement and the extension of the trends project;
- International Seminars on Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems (Portugal, 24-25 November 2000), Short Cycle University Degrees (Finland, early 2001) and Translational Education (Sweden, February/March 2001);
- the preparation of a report on the progress of the European Higher Education Area, to be presented in Prague;
- an Academic Convention, to be organised in Salamanca (29-30 March 2001) by the Confederation, CRE and the Spanish Rectors Conference, with the purpose to mobilise European higher education institutions to play their full role in the Bologna process and to take a pro-active position by preparing and presenting clear messages to the ministers, in order to influence governmental policies as to the kind of higher education to develop and to support.

The Convention will in principle provide the opportunity to launch officially the European University Association, as a new organisation resulting from the merger of the Confederation and CRE, to represent all Universities in Europe.

5. Linking research to the Bologna process

Research is a core element for the concept of University as we understand it in Europe. Therefore, any discussions on the European dimension of higher education cannot leave research out of it.

For more than ten years the Confederation has been insisting on the need for a European research policy intended to go much beyond the framework programmes. Indeed, these programmes are important and useful, but they should be instruments to implement a clearly defined policy rather than a policy on themselves. The position paper *On the Future European Union Policy on Research and Technological Development*, adopted by the Confederation in November 1999 and presented to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Ministers in charge of research and technology in each Member State, conveyed a number of principles considered to be essential for such a policy.

The communication from the European Commission on the European Research Area, released for discussion last January, is a first and important step in the direction pointed out by the Confederation. Our reaction so far, expressed as a first comment in February and a detailed statement in May, is supportive to the idea of the European research area but critical, in a constructive way, to its development. The recent report from the European Commission on the comments received so far seems to show understanding for the points raised and consequently to promise positive developments in the near future.

It is, however, a pity that the Bologna process and the European Research Area are being treated in a completely separate way. It is true that the two processes are in different stages of development, but some form of integration is necessary. In particular, a link that could be established at once is the obvious relation between post-graduation studies and the training of young researchers. The Confederation intends to include this theme in the programme of the Academic Convention in Salamanca and so bring it into the Bologna process.

5. Conclusion

The objective of building a European Higher Education Area surely raises big challenges to higher education institutions, to rectors' conferences, to governments and to other actors concerned with the European dimension of higher education.

The Bologna process is on its way, gaining momentum. It means a turning point for higher education in Europe that will leave very little untouched. Changes, or the intention to change, are already visible in many places, although with different speeds.

As a representative of Universities in Europe, sometimes I put a question to myself: will Universities succeed in being sufficiently pro-active in the preparation and introduction of the reforms that will better allow them to answer their responsibilities towards Society, as seen from a European perspective?

There is that known quotation that "changing the University is like moving a cemetery: one gets little help from the inside!" Personally, I am more optimistic about the capacity of Universities to respond to this new demanding, but stimulating, situation. In reality, from the discussions in which I had the opportunity to participate both in the Confederation and in several countries, it is possible to detect a number of positive signals:

- there is greater awareness within higher education institutions, particularly at leadership level, about the main issues and the need to face them (more work is however necessary to reach all the academic community);

- the national rectors conferences are actively involved in the Bologna process, in connection with ministries, students' associations and other partners;
- the European Commission is playing an important supportive and non-intrusive role, which facilitates cooperation;
- the process is not starting from scratch: as said earlier, some important tools are already in place, such as ECTS, the NARIC/ENIC networks for recognition, the Diploma Supplement, the European Network on Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ENQA) or the thematic networks, which have accumulated valuable experience and involved many academics in their development;
- national systems are clearly shifting and, in some cases, they are already implementing convergent reforms.

I conclude expressing the belief that universities in general will be able to face and grasp the occasion, which is also an opportunity to give greater visibility to their social relevance.

Sérgio Machado dos Santos

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