

TOWARDS A COHERENT EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION SPACE :

From Bologna to Prague

The Bologna Declaration of June 1999

In the wake of the Sorbonne Declaration signed in May 1998 by a more limited number of countries, the Bologna Declaration on the creation of a European space for higher education is a pledge taken by 29 countries to reform the structures of their own higher education system in such a way that overall convergence emerges from the process at the European level.

The Declaration is not just a political statement; rather, it sets out an action programme for which it defines the key aspects:

- **a clearly defined common goal**: the creation of a coherent European higher education space, as a means to foster :
 - employability and mobility in Europe,
 - the international competitiveness and the attractiveness of European higher education in the world;
- **a realistic deadline**: the European higher education space should be completed within the next decade;
- **a set of specified objectives**:
 - the design of a common framework of reference of easily readable and comparable degrees;
 - the articulation of studies into undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with first degrees relevant to the labour market and graduate studies requiring the prior completion of a first degree;
 - the generalisation of ECTS-compatible credit systems;
 - a European dimension in quality assurance;
 - the elimination of remaining obstacles to the mobility of students, teachers and graduates;
- **an organised follow-up and implementation structure and process**, based mainly on intergovernmental cooperation conducted in collaboration with higher education institutions and associations; the declaration also states that ministers would meet again in Prague in 2001 to review progress and plan for the next stages.

The progress towards the gradual creation of a European higher education space, initiated at the Sorbonne and amplified and defined in the Bologna declaration, is mainly a process of structural change: it calls for the reform of national systems as well as for curricular and institutional change at universities and other institutions of higher education. Such change requires that decision makers at all levels fully acknowledge the changing needs and demands in higher education in deeply and rapidly changing societies and economies; new challenges

addressed. As is always the case with structural reforms, the introduction and acceptance of the change required are conditional on awareness of risks and opportunities and can only be introduced on the basis of changed visions and attitudes. This is where the challenge is greatest.

Follow-up structures and activities at the European level

Developments in the convergence process can be divided into various types, according to their purpose (information, discussions, reforms) or their actors (governments, institutions, associations, students, etc). Given the aims of this article, it may however be more useful to introduce separately the activities undertaken at the European level as part of the work programme of the official follow-up structure put in place by Ministers after the signature of the Bologna Declaration. This follow-up structure and its work programme are introduced in the present section. There are of course also numerous independent activities undertaken by governments, associations or institutions, which constitute the substance of the change process in progress; they are introduced in the next section.

- The follow-up structure put in place by Ministers is based on two groups :
 - a "large" group comprising one (in some cases two) designated ministerial representative of each signatory country; this group met in Helsinki in November 1999 and in Lisbon in June 2000; it is scheduled to meet again in Paris next December; in its recent meeting in Lisboa, the group shared information on implementation actions of all types (information, reforms, debates) in the respective signatory countries;
 - a smaller working group, or steering committee, comprising representatives of the countries in charge of the EU Presidency in the time from Bologna to Prague (the enlarged EU Troika, i.e. Finland, Portugal, France and Sweden), the Czech Republic (as host country of the next meeting of Ministers), the European Commission, and two higher education organisations: the Association of European Universities (CRE) and the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences. This group meets more often than the large group and has the responsibility to stimulate, coordinate and organise the whole action programme leading to the Prague meeting.

Meetings are chaired by the country holding the presidency of the EU, and the Bologna process has already benefited from the convinced support and dedication of both the Finnish and Portuguese presidents of the two follow-up groups.

It is interesting and important to point out that in Lisbon three organisations have been invited to participate as observers in the meetings of the "large" group: the Council of Europe, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education – Colleges, Polytechnics, Universities of Professional Education (EURASHE), and the European Liaison Group of student organisations active at the European level. The addition of these partners in the process towards the European higher education space signals the will of the political and educational authorities in charge of the preparation of the next steps to keep the debate and process as open as possible, in order to increase the sharing of information and broaden the perspective of measures to be proposed.

- The follow-up groups have adopted a work programme, which includes various types of activities at the European, national or institutional level; the core of these activities consists in a series of surveys and studies and European seminars dealing with the main strands of the convergence programme agreed upon in Bologna:
 - transnational education (i.e. education delivered in a country under the control of a university located in another country) has been a major topic of the annual meeting of Directors General of Higher Education and Heads of Rectors' Conferences in Aveiro in April; a mapping of transnational education activities, coupled with a survey on how countries and institutions deal with related issues (recognition, competition, quality, etc) has been commissioned by the European Commission; the results will be presented in Malmö, Sweden, in February or March 2001;
 - a seminar on credit accumulation and transfer systems will be held in Leiria, Portugal, in November of this year;
 - another seminar, dealing with the structure of short undergraduate university studies will be hosted by Finland in the beginning of 2001;
 - the issue of accreditation (i.e. the certification that certain standards of quality are met), which was not formally included as action line in the Bologna Declaration, is receiving growing attention as a means to guarantee the transportability of degrees/qualifications in Europe; a seminar on this topic will be organised by CRE and the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences with support from the European Commission. Work on issues related to quality and recognition can benefit from the recent creation on the European Network of Quality Agencies in higher education (ENQA) and from the creation of a working group on the implications of the Bologna Declaration by the NARIC/ENIC network.

The work programme of the follow-up groups includes also the preparation of two major events planned in 2001 : the Convention of European Institutions of Higher Education, and the Prague Higher Education Summit of Ministers in charge of higher education and representatives of the higher education community. These two events are presented in more detail in the final section of this article. Two main reports have been commissioned by the follow-up groups for the preparation of these meetings, with support from the European Commission:

- a survey of trends and issues in the structure of higher education, which complements a study on the same topic which served as a main background report to the Bologna conference but covered only the EU/EEA countries; this report, called "Trends II", will encompass all signatory countries (as well as a few non-signatory ones, thanks to support from the European Training Foundation); it will also review changes (actual and planned) in the various countries and will try to identify significant trends and issues for future action;
- a overall, action-oriented report to Ministers, ahead of their meeting in Prague, drawing on the conclusions of "trends II" and all other reports and activities under the purview of the two follow-up groups. This report will be under the responsibility of Mr Pedro Lourtie, who chaired the follow-up groups during the Portuguese Presidency of the EU.

Follow-up activities in progress at the national and institutional level

It is not possible to provide an up-to-date overview of all activities in progress which are part of, stimulate or contribute to, the convergence process in European higher education. The following should therefore be seen as no more than some examples of actions related to the planned creation of the European space for higher education.

- Information events and debates

- The signature of the Bologna Declaration has led to a huge number of meetings and debates about its significance in a particular country, for certain types of institutions, or in particular subject areas. In several countries, the Ministry and/or the Rectors' Conference have organised a national Bologna Day (e.g. Austria, Switzerland, soon Germany and the Baltic countries) or other meetings where the Bologna process was a major topic on the agenda (e.g. Spain, Malta, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Romania, soon the Czech Republic); this includes also countries who have not (or not yet) signed the Declaration, e.g. Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. An explanatory document of the content and significance of the Bologna Declaration was prepared jointly by CRE and the Confederation and widely distributed, including at the national SOCRATES II seminars which are being held in participating countries.
- The Bologna Declaration is also an important topic at numerous workshops and conferences organised by networks/associations in higher education, e.g. CRE and Confederation events, but also at the 2000 annual conference of e.g. EURASHE (colleges and polytechnics) and the Association of Finnish Polytechnics (both in May), the European Society for Engineering Education (SEFI) in September or FNEGE (French National Foundation for Management Education) in November; and of course EAIE in November/December ("Reforming higher education: the international way"). Another example is the meeting organised in Vienna in March for students from Central/Eastern Europe invited by the Austrian student association.
- Interestingly, the developments towards a more coherent, and hence more compatible European higher education system has already received attention from universities outside of Europe; this is hardly surprising, since the completion of a understandable degree structure in Europe would make the continent more attractive for students, teachers and universities from the world, and provide a suitable alternative to study destinations in other world regions. Contacts have been established on this basis with the Association of Universities of Asia and the Pacific (AUAP); within the framework of the Columbus programme, there will be two seminars on regional convergence in higher education between Europe and Latin America before the end of the year 2000. The Association of Commonwealth Universities is also showing interest in the European convergence process.

- Curricular and structural reforms

In many countries, legislative changes introduced before the adoption of the Bologna Declaration or simultaneously with it have contributed to accelerate the movement towards convergent reforms elsewhere. In Germany, the number of new degrees (undergraduate-postgraduate) offered by universities and *fachhochschulen* is increasing rapidly, and a first university has announced the replacement of all old degrees by new ones. In Germany and Austria, the newly created accreditation councils are now

operational. The introduction of two-stage, credit-based studies is reaching the operational phase at all universities in all subjects in Italy. In many countries, authorities are studying the implications of the convergence process on their system of degrees; in some cases, universities take the lead and introduce structural reforms in line with the Bologna programme of action, e.g. in the Netherlands or Switzerland. From the material provided by the representatives of signatory countries at the Lisbon meeting of the "large" follow-up group, a wave of legislative and curricular change can be predicted for the near future, in time for the Prague meeting of 2001. In the Baltic region, the debate is being held at the regional level. In a number of countries, there is an animated debate about the respective role of universities and colleges/polytechnics concerning the award of Master degrees; the articulation of studies in two phases as required in the Bologna Declaration is an issue in some countries (mainly in Central Europe) and some subject areas (e.g. engineering). The introduction of ECTS as a credit accumulation as well as transfer system is rapidly gaining momentum in numerous countries and universities.

Next steps: two important events in 2001

The change towards more convergence and compatibility is a complex and lasting process in which political and educational aspects need to be coordinated in a dynamic way; impetus and stimulation for change do not always come from the same side, and contacts at the European level between Ministers, governmental officers/agencies, heads of institutions, teachers, administrators and students are the main means to overcome resistance and bottlenecks.

The threads of all follow-up work and new initiatives needed will be drawn together in the spring of the year 2001 at two crucial meetings:

- The Convention of European Higher Education Institutions, which will be held (subject to final confirmation) in Salamanca, Spain, in the last days of March. It will be organised jointly by CRE and the Confederation, in cooperation with the Spanish Rectors' Conference (CRUE) and the host university, with support from the European Commission.

The main aims of the Convention will be:

- to mobilise European higher education institutions to play their full role in the Bologna process; this requires that they be first fully informed and then realise that this is the only opportunity they have to influence the future as a community;
- for European institutions of higher education to «get their own act together» in order to be able to tell Ministers what kind of higher education they want and are willing to support;
- to issue a public statement on their commitment, together with a message to Ministers to tell them what universities want and invite them to discuss this at the Prague meeting.

The Convention will address the whole of higher education (not only universities). It should be understood as the preparation of a comprehensive action programme for the whole of higher education, and as a forum from which a consensus should emerge on the creation of the European higher education space. It will address the various «strands» of the convergence process identified in the Bologna Declaration as well as intra-European coherence and external competitiveness in general.

- The Prague Higher Education Summit (18-19 May)

This meeting of Ministers in charge of higher education will also involve representatives of the higher education community. Its main purpose will be for Ministers to review progress and to draw up measures and priorities for the next stages of the convergence process. Ministers will be presented with the report and proposals emerging from the work of the follow-up groups, and with the conclusions of the Convention of higher education institutions.

The Prague Higher Education Summit will be prepared jointly by the Swedish Presidency of the EU and the Czech authorities. Participation will be by invitation of President Havel and the Czech government, in conjunction with Czech academic authorities. In addition to ministerial delegations from all countries, there will be representatives of the European Commission, major higher education organisations, other stakeholders in higher education, experts and observers.

The Prague Summit is not expected to produce a new "declaration". Decisive steps forward can however be foreseen, in the form of an ambitious, comprehensive and detailed action programme for the next stage.

Ministers in Prague will also need to discuss the possibility to enlarge the convergence process to some countries which have not signed the Bologna Declaration but are interested in being involved in the overall process leading to the European Space of Higher Education. Informal signals of interest have already been received from some countries, especially in Southeast Europe.

Concluding remarks

It is too early to draw up an inventory of all changes in progress and an assessment of the situation and trends. This will be the main purpose of the "Trends II" study, which will be available in February 2001, in time for the Salamanca Convention and the Prague Summit.

However, it is easy to observe that the process has become a central aspect of the debate about higher education in the countries concerned and at the European level, both in governmental and educational circles. It is of utmost importance at this stage not to underestimate the level of change which is in progress, nor the pace at which such change is happening. It is equally important to point out that convergent change is being introduced or planned by governments and institutions not simply because they feel an obligation to comply with the Bologna Declaration, but because there is a compelling need for them to move in that direction in their own interest: the main merit of the Bologna agreement was to capture, crystallise and formulate an already existing need of Europe, its constituent countries and its higher education institutions to move in the direction postsigned in the Declaration..

Another positive factor is the strong support which several constituent aspects of the convergence process are enjoying from the European Commission.

The external aspects of the Bologna Declaration (i.e. the issues concerning the attractiveness and presence of European universities in the world) seem to still receive insufficient attention in the follow-up process. The awareness that the ability to compete

(at home as well as abroad) for reputation, students, researchers and resources is dependent on the recognition of institutions and whole higher education systems outside of the home country/region is only slowly gaining momentum in Europe. Higher education in a worldwide context seems to be higher on the agendas of non-European universities and countries, the World Trade Organisation and the G8 than on those of European universities and governments.

The 2001 meetings will be essential steps in the process. They are not going to be, in all likelihood, just stocktaking events, but rather accelerators and catalysts of the convergence process in progress. The role of education as a preparation to employment and a key factor in economic development in the knowledge society has been more and more strongly emphasised since the Sorbonne Declaration, in particular at the European Summit in Lisbon in March of this year. It has become very clear that the higher education sector is expected to contribute more to making the European labour market an everyday, effective reality. European students need and deserve degrees they can effectively use all-over Europe and beyond. In 2001, at the Salamanca Convention and the Prague meeting with Ministers, the European higher education community has a unique opportunity to agree on the kind of higher education space it wants, and to influence the process leading to it. This opportunity to demonstrate that higher education can agree on a common goal and mobilise its resources to implement it should of course not be missed: it will not return.

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The authors are jointly in charge of the preparation of the "Trends II" report which will map the trends and issues emerging from the debate and reforms in the period between the Bologna Declaration and the Salamanca and Prague meetings.

Annexes

Annex 1:

Internet addresses for more information on the Bologna Declaration and process

rks.dk/trends1.htm (Danish Rectors' Conference)

Background report for the Bologna Conference ("Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education") prepared by Guy Haug and Jette Kirstein on behalf of the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and CRE with support from the European Commission:

- executive summary
- report
- annex: analysis of the Sorbonne Declaration of May 1998
- survey of higher education systems of EU/EEA countries (tables and comments)

Text of the Bologna Declaration

unige.ch/cre (CRE, Association of European Universities)

Link to report on “Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education”

Programme of the Bologna Conference and text of the Bologna Declaration

Presentation by Kenneth Edwards, President of CRE, to the Ministers at the Bologna Conference

Presentation by Andris Barblan, Secretary General of CRE, on “The Sorbonne Declaration: follow up and implications”

"Introduction to the theme of transnational education", by Sergio Machado, President of the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences, with a response by Guy Haug

crue.upm.es/eurec (Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences)

Link to the report on “Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education”

Presentation by Hans-Uwe Erichsen, President of the Confederation, at the Bologna Conference (“The challenges of a European higher education space”)

Introduction to the theme of transnational education, by Sergio Machado, President of the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences, with a response by Guy Haug

eaie.nl (European Association for International Education)

“Bologna and beyond: visions of a European future”, keynote address by Guy Haug to the EAIE Conference in Maastricht in December 1999

Link to report on “Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education”

Text of Bologna Declaration

Annex 2:

National Contact persons for the Bologna process

The following list was drawn up by the Portuguese Presidency after the meeting of the "large" follow-up group in Lisbon on 30 June 2000. The name of persons present on 30 June is shown in bold. Where another name is shown for a given country, it is the name of the official contact person, who could not attend the Lisbon meeting.

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