

Towards the European higher education area : survey of main reforms from Bologna to Prague

Summary and conclusions

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Review of structures and trends in the countries not covered in 1999 in the Trends 1 report

Trends 1 was mainly based on a survey of structure and trends in higher education in the EU/EEA countries. Trends 2 surveyed the other signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration. This review:

- confirms all the main conclusions reached in the Trends 1 report;
- reinforces the observation concerning the move towards a two-tier system, but not necessarily corresponding to the definitions used for the degree structure outlined in the Bologna Declaration (e.g. the notions of "postgraduate" or "binary" system of higher education);
- confirms the observation concerning the move towards accreditation;
- shows that long study programmes at all levels, and rather inflexible mono-disciplinary curricula still exist in several countries and would need to be adjusted to meet the principles of the Bologna Declaration.

The follow-up process to the Bologna Declaration: widespread interest and support

- The Bologna Declaration is on all agendas: all countries have established a unit or a forum to explain and discuss its content and implications. It serves as a new source of dialogue between Ministries and higher education institutions, and between sub-sectors of higher education;
- It is mostly seen as confirming/reinforcing national priorities: this is the process' biggest strength, i.e. it "crystallises" major trends and reveals that issues and solutions have a European dimension; as a consequence the process is not (or no longer) seen as an intrusion, but as a source of information on the most suitable way forward for Europe;
- It has been used to accelerate, facilitate and guide change: the main role of the Declaration has become to serve as a long term agenda for structural change;
- A major strength of the process is its complementarity with other developments in progress. It reinforces and it is being reinforced by other tools/factors which point in the same direction: Lisbon Convention, Diploma Supplement, ENQA, EU

- Directives, EU mobility programmes including ECTS, ENIC/NARIC network, reforms entailed by the accession process to the EU in the countries concerned;
- The Bologna process is both a consequence of, and a contribution to the process of integration of European higher education.

Consensus on the core objectives of the process

- Mobility: there is unanimous support to the promotion of the mobility of students as well as of graduates, both outbound and (less expectedly) inbound. Teacher mobility seems to still receive insufficient attention. The mobility agenda of the Declaration is strongly underpinned by EU tools (ECTS, SOCRATES, TEMPUS, directives on professional recognition, Mobility Action Plan) and by the Lisbon Convention as well as by the willingness to prepare for EU integration in the countries concerned. ECTS and the Diploma Supplement receive very strong support.
- Employability: the Bologna Declaration has reinforced the debate and increased the awareness that employability is an issue all over Europe. There are new "professional Bachelors" in several countries, and new "professional Masters" in some. The change to a two-tier structure does not necessarily come with immediate in-depth renovation of the underlying curricula. The debate has now taken into account that there are various ways in which first degrees can be "relevant to the European labour market" and that all need not to be directly geared towards short term employment in a particular profession. In some countries university Bachelors are mainly seen as a preparation and a platform for the choice of postgraduate studies; this is less a problem where a strong college sector produces a significant number of holders of professionally oriented Bachelors.
- Competitiveness/attractiveness: most countries now seem to understand "competitiveness" in a positive sense and to endorse the need for their higher education systems to be "attractive". The issue is seen as "important" or "crucial" in an unexpectedly high number of countries: several have specific comprehensive plans aimed at non-European students; accession countries want to enhance their attractiveness to EU students in order to balance their exchanges within SOCRATES. No country said competitiveness was irrelevant, but it is not yet on the agenda everywhere. Most countries show little concern about transnational education and foreign accreditation sought by their universities. Answers to transnational education are mainly of two types: to rule it out, or to subject it to national rules; neither is likely to resolve the issue. The Bologna Declaration is attracting interest outside Europe, in particular in Latin America: this confirms that understandable higher education structures would make Europe a more attractive study destination in other world regions.

Instruments of the convergence process

- Easily readable and comparable degrees: three countries developed comprehensive and coherent qualifications frameworks which could be useful for similar exercises in others and therefore relevant for Europe as a whole. Regional higher education areas are being consolidated in the Baltic Republics and the Nordic countries. Far from imposing uniformity as was sometimes feared, Bologna has encouraged more diversity and more flexibility. In particular, there are now more binary systems, with more bridges between sub-systems and more "professional Bachelors/Masters": The surprising fears that the Bologna Declaration had the intention to transform all colleges into universities seems to be disappearing. On the contrary, the move towards integrated systems (one system with different institutions and various bridges between them) is confirmed in a number of countries. The Diploma Supplement is seen as a major instrument to facilitate readability and comparability. There are still very complex degree structures in many countries, e.g. systems which are in fact not binary but "trinary" (universities, colleges/polytechnics, short post-secondary courses) with different degree structures in different sectors and in different disciplines. The least compatible sector seems to be the non-university sector, which is growing but without sufficient convergence between countries. There are also still many examples of confusing names/nomenclature (e.g. undergraduate "Master" degrees or "academies" focussing on Bachelor education). The integration of lifelong learning as a regular part of higher education and of the qualification framework is a priority in only a relatively small number of countries.

- Mainly organised in undergraduate/postgraduate phases: the movement of convergence towards a two-tier structure continues, through the implementation of reforms previously adopted, the consolidation of Bachelor/Master structures introduced during the last decade and the initiation of reforms in several new countries. There are examples of two-tier structures in ALL disciplines including engineering (few in medicine). There are however also many countries where the Bachelor/Master structure does not concern certain professional curricula, which remain organised in long, one-tier courses. The strongest trend is towards 3-year Bachelors, but there are many examples of Bachelors lasting 3 - 4 years. A limited move towards professional Bachelors is in progress. Several comprehensive plans combine the introduction of Bachelor/Master degrees, credits and accreditation ("the golden triangle of reforms"), mostly in countries that engaged early in the reform process. There is not a similar effort towards convergence at the postgraduate level: there is therefore a need for debate/progress concerning the various types of Master degrees. Admission to Master courses is usually not automatic, at least not for "outside" students.

- Credit accumulation and transfer systems: there is a strong push towards ECTS-compatible credits based on national systems with easy translation into ECTS, or on the adoption of ECTS itself, either by obligation or more often following the strong recommendation of rectors' conferences and/or ministries. There is concern about the potential of divergence in the implementation of the system. The fears that the introduction of credits would deprive universities of the possibility to organise their curricula and oblige them to recognise all imported credits seem to be diminishing.

- Quality assurance: there is a powerful movement towards more quality assurance (new agencies, ENQA network), but in very different ways: unclear relationship between "quality assurance" and "accreditation", applied to all or only part of the higher education system, focussing on programmes (sometimes along subject lines across a whole country) or on institutions, with different types of consequences. The development of "accreditation" is now more easily recognisable than in the Trends 1 report: many non EU/EEA countries have accreditation, and several others are considering the possibility or have firm plans for a new accreditation agency (separate from the quality assurance agency or combined with it). In some countries that wish to increase the international acceptance of their new degrees, accreditation is seen as a *sine qua non*. There is however still confusion about the benefits and the meaning of accreditation. The decentralised approach to quality assurance/accreditation (sometimes referred to as "meta accreditation") which is being experimented in one country may provide inspiration for European mechanisms based on mutual acceptance of quality assurance decisions, respecting national and subject differences and not overloading universities.

A significant impact in non-signatory countries

- The Trends II report covers six non-signatory countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It does not cover other countries, although it is known that there is interest in e.g. Turkey, Russia and some other CIS countries.
- In these six countries the Bologna Declaration receives strong attention, in particular as a reference for long term structural reforms and as an agenda for change in the whole of Europe.
- In the countries of former Yugoslavia and in Albania the structure of curricula, degrees and institutions differs significantly from the principles of the Bologna Declaration, but the reform process has started or is in progress and is supported by various European programmes and initiatives. The reform prepared for Kosovo by the International Administration took direct inspiration from the Bologna Declaration. A major difficulty for the development of the kind of curricula envisaged by the Bologna Declaration is the fragmentation of universities into independent faculties (resulting in inflexible mono-disciplinary curricula) in the countries of the former Yugoslavia.
- The higher education system in Cyprus is already largely in line with the principles of the Bologna Declaration.

Some indications and directions for the future

- In future priority attention should be paid to :
 - the challenge of readability of the Master level;
 - fostering convergence in the college/polytechnic sector;
 - the reform/adaptation of curricula at higher education institutions that have adopted or are adopting a two-tier articulation (there are good examples

- showing the way towards shorter, more broadly based and relevant Bachelors in all areas);
- the development of quality assurance mechanisms extending to the European level *bona fide* quality labels earned at the national or regional level; ENQA is likely to have a major role and responsibility in meeting this challenge;
 - external aspects, in particular concerning the attractiveness and credibility of European higher education at the global level;
 - support to the process of system reforms and curricular renovation in Southeast European countries.
- Some fears which were initially felt from the Bologna Declaration seem to be diminishing or even vanishing. It is now in general accepted that:
 - the Declaration does not challenge the diversity of systems and disciplines, but rather to promote it and organise it;
 - it is fully compatible with binary systems;
 - credit systems do not deprive universities of the possibility to organise their curricula in a coherent way, and do not oblige them to accept without discrimination all credits which students would like to transfer;
 - there are various ways in which degrees can be "relevant to the labour market" and the need is for a diversity of first degrees opening possibilities in the labour market and/or the way to various types of postgraduate studies.
 - As the process develops, there is a need and a demand for:
 - the reconfirmation of the main aims and principles of the Bologna Declaration, in order to underpin its role as a reference for long term reforms and as a European agenda of change;
 - more co-ordination, in particular concerning the implementation of ECTS and the profile of Bachelor and Master degrees, in order to avoid that too much variance creates a new type of obstacles and annihilates the benefits of the convergence process.
 - The general trend towards diversified systems (with diverse institutions offering a variety of Bachelors, a variety of Masters and various types of "bridges" allowing students to change track) points in the direction of a network, rather than a ladder of qualifications:
 - the continuation of long one-tier curricula in a limited number of areas does not contradict the overall objectives and principles of the Bologna Declaration (even though there is no convincing argument – except maybe in medicine – that the adoption of a two-tier structure would not provide significant benefits);
 - even though the main direction is towards 3-year Bachelors, any European system needs to accommodate first degrees with diverse purpose, orientation and profile requiring the equivalent in credits of 3 to 4 years of full time study. Extended first degrees would not pose any difficulty if they formed a common European base in a given subject area (e.g. engineering); otherwise, it would be useful to distinguish them from other Bachelor degrees (e.g. by calling them "advanced" Bachelor or Honours degrees").
 - There is still a growing need for information about how the main issues are seen and addressed elsewhere in Europe and in the world:

- even more than hitherto, progress towards more convergence will be dependent on the availability of comparative studies, the dissemination of good practice and the tracking of problem areas;
 - in the vocabulary for higher education as a whole (e.g. "binary", "two-tier", "non-university", "accreditation") and in the nomenclature of degrees there are certain confusions or inconsistencies to which attention should be paid (e.g. what is postgraduate, name of certain degrees or institutions and their translation into English).
- The marked growth of the attention given to the "external" dimension of the process and to the development of tools/plans to make national higher education more attractive at home, in Europe and in the world should continue. The fact that this process could be made easier and more successful if it had a European dimension has not yet been acknowledged: European degrees will not be generally accepted in the world if they are not generally accepted in Europe.
 - Future progress towards comparable qualifications requires additional work at the European level within particular subject or professional areas. A series of publications or databases on studies in Europe in all major subject areas would enhance comparability and mobility both within Europe and with the rest of the world.

Finally, it seems important to point out that the future of the Bologna process and indeed of European higher education is bound to be related to two fundamental principles which could guide all future action :

- students in Europe have a need and a *right* to study for degrees that can effectively be used in Europe, not just in the country/region where they were earned;
- a major responsibility of higher education institutions and governments in Europe is to ensure that they take all steps needed to be in a position to award this type of qualifications to their students.