



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Education and Culture

**“Towards the European Higher Education Area: Responding to
challenges in a globalised world”**

Conference of European Higher Education Ministers

Contribution of the European Commission

London, 17/18 May 2007

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This short paper outlines how EU-level activities have contributed to advance progress on several issues which will be for discussion at the London Ministerial Conference and how the Commission intends to continue its support for Member States in their work on modernising higher education.

1. Introduction

The European Commission aims to support Member States in their efforts to modernise higher education systems, in all their areas of activity - education, research and innovation - making them more coherent, more flexible, and more responsive to the needs of society. Modernisation is needed in order to face the challenges of globalisation and to develop the skills and capacity of the European workforce to be innovative. They should enable universities to play their role in the Europe of Knowledge and to make a strong contribution to the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs.

The Commission has pointed to three broad areas in higher education in which change could help:

- Curricula: The three cycle system (bachelor-master-doctorate), competence based learning, flexible learning paths, recognition, mobility.
- Governance: University autonomy, strategic partnership including with enterprises, quality assurance.
- Funding: Diversified sources of university income better linked to performance, promoting equity, access and efficiency, including the possible role of tuition fees, grants and loans.

The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europe's citizens and for citizens and scholars from other continents. Reform was needed then and reform is still needed today if Europe is to match the performance of the best performing systems in the world, notably the United States and Asia. The Bologna Process should be seen in the context of broader initiatives to support the creation of a Europe of knowledge. Thus the Copenhagen Process promotes enhanced European co-operation in Vocational Education and Training. To establish synergies between Copenhagen and Bologna, the Commission has brought forward its proposal for the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF). This is linked to and supported by other initiatives in the fields of transparency of qualifications (EUROPASS), credit transfer (ECTS-ECVET) and quality assurance (ENQA-ENQAVET). Of similar importance is the link between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area (EHEA and ERA), which

is embedded in the current round of the Bologna Process, inter alia through the attention given to doctoral level activities.

2. Bologna goes global - decisive steps in London

In London, Ministers are going to take decisions which will be decisive for the future of European Higher Education in a globalised world. They will adopt the external dimension strategy for the European Higher Education Area and they will give the green light for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies. Other topics in London include the adoption of the 2007 stocktaking report, the further promotion of the social dimension of Bologna reforms, the position of doctoral candidates and early stage researchers.

External dimension strategy

The external dimension strategy is a response to the growing need to ensure the visibility and openness of European higher education in the world, both vis-à-vis neighbouring countries and other continents. International contacts and mobility are increasing in numbers and intensity, and so are inter-university cooperation and policy dialogue. The proposed external dimension strategy comprises a set of principles and activities in the fields of information, promotion, competition partnerships, recognition of qualifications and policy dialogue.

The Commission warmly supports the external dimension strategy proposal because better connected higher education systems will help to promote mutual understanding among peoples. International dialogue, comparison and competition are strong drivers for quality enhancement in the field of higher education.

The European Commission supports the external dimension strategy, in concrete terms, through its policies and programmes. The EU external policy aims at establishing close cooperation with all world regions and in particular with the neighbouring countries through the European Neighbourhood Policy, which includes almost all Bologna signatory states plus the Mediterranean countries. EU Programmes cover a broad range of capacity building measures in higher education through the external assistance instruments for pre-accession countries, neighbourhood countries and developing countries (IPA, ENPI and DCI) and more particularly through the Tempus programme, which has an annual budget of about €55 million.

Relations with other continents are supported through a series of bilateral cooperation programmes: EU-USA/Canada, Asia-Link, EDULINK, ALFA and ALBAN for Latin America and the new Nyerere Programme for Africa. A new multilateral framework for supporting cooperation with industrialised countries has been proposed by the Commission in February 2007.

Of special importance in this context is the EU's flagship programme for worldwide academic cooperation, Erasmus Mundus. Highly integrated European Masters Courses and competitive scholarships are making a powerful contribution to improving the attractiveness of “destination Europe”. By the end of the programme's first phase in 2008, 100 courses and 8,000 scholarship-holders will have received EU support. Following a world wide survey undertaken on behalf of the Commission, it is clear European higher education is well

perceived in some parts of the world but largely unknown in others¹. To address this deficit, the Commission has launched the "Global Promotion Project", within the framework of the Erasmus Mundus programme, which aims to strengthen worldwide the image of European higher education, by creating a user-friendly website for international students, experimenting with innovative services such as European education advisers in certain parts of the world, developing higher education marketing competence at institutional and national level through competence-building workshops, organising European fairs and campaigns, developing promotional tools and preparing feasibility studies on various longer-term promotion methods.

The European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies

The Register, to be launched in the second half of 2007, will assist in furthering the development of the European Higher Education Area by providing clear and reliable information about trustworthy quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. The Register will help to raise the visibility of European higher education and boost confidence in institutions and programmes within Europe and worldwide. The Register will list both national quality assurance agencies (ENQA members) and agencies operating at a European or global scale.

The Register will provide a basis for governments to authorise higher education institutions to choose any agency from the Register, where that is compatible with national arrangements.

The Register was specifically requested by Bologna Ministers in Bergen in 2005 as well as EU Ministers and the European Parliament in 2006. The Register has been prepared by ENQA and stakeholders from the higher education sector (EUA, EURASHE and ESIB), with the support of the European Commission. The Commission is planning to provide start-up funding in 2007 and 2008.

3. University staff support for higher education reform - results of a Eurobarometer Special Target Survey

In the first two months of 2007, a Eurobarometer survey was carried out on behalf of the European Commission, among teaching professionals of higher education institutions in the 27 Member States, as well as Croatia, Iceland, Norway and Turkey. The objective of the survey was to find out how university staff feels about higher education reforms, both the restructuring of curricula (Bologna) and reforms in the fields of governance and funding. The results of the survey are positive as they demonstrate that university staff, to a large extent, supports the reform movement. The detailed report, including individual country results, is published on the Commission web pages.

The main findings, as presented in the Summary, are as follows:

- Almost half of teaching professionals agree that the introduction of the three cycle system will improve, or has improved, the quality of education. Nevertheless, one-third would have preferred to keep the one-tier system; i.e. no distinction between Bachelors and Masters.

¹ *Perceptions of European Higher Education in Third Countries*. Erasmus Mundus project, carried out by the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA):<http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/mundus/acareport.pdf>

- A large majority of respondents in the EU27 acknowledge the need for European quality standards for higher education and European quality labels for institutions and programmes.
- Almost half of respondents agree that first cycle graduates will find a suitable job, however, a similar number feel they should first follow a Masters programme in the same field of study before trying to enter the labour market.
- Four out of five respondents agree that the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) should be used in all programmes of study.
- Almost three out of four teaching professionals agree that study and training programmes should encompass more generic competences, such as communication, teamwork and entrepreneurship, and be adapted to meet labour market needs in a better way.
- Respondents agree that student mobility should be an obligatory part in the curriculum for doctoral candidates (65%) and for students in general (58%).
- A large majority of teaching professionals in the EU (87 %) agree that universities should open up to adult learners.
- 70 % of teaching professionals think that more opportunities should be created for double and joint degrees at the Bachelor and Master level, while 54% agree that double and joint degrees should also be promoted at doctoral level.
- Four out of five teaching professionals of higher education institutions in the EU27 agree that universities are in need of better internal management.
- Three out of four teaching professionals also agree that universities need more autonomy from public authorities.
- Three out of four respondents agree that partnerships with business will reinforce universities, and 68 % think that competition between universities will lead to better quality. Slightly less than three out of four respondents agree that private funding would help universities to gain extra income and to perform better and 68% also agree that student fees are an acceptable source of extra income for universities.

4. Modernising higher education - The Lisbon agenda for universities

Bologna curricular reforms are important, but more is needed to modernise higher education in Europe. Governments should give institutions more autonomy. Universities should modernise the content of their curricula, create virtual campuses, reform their governance and professionalize their management of human resources, investment and administrative procedures, diversify their funding and open up to new types of learners, business and society at large. In May 2006, the Commission published a Communication² pointing to nine areas where action would help deliver the modernisation agenda for universities in education, research and innovation:

1. Break down the barriers around universities in Europe
2. Ensure real autonomy and accountability for universities
3. Provide incentives for structured partnerships with the business community
4. Provide the right skills and competencies for the labour market
5. Reduce the funding gap and make funding work more effectively in education and research
6. Enhance inter-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity

² “Delivering on the Modernisation Agenda for Universities” Education, Research and Innovation COM(2006)208 final, of 10 May 2006 - http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/comuniv2006_en.pdf

7. Activate knowledge through interaction with society
8. Reward excellence at the highest level
9. Make the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area more visible and attractive in the world.

The Communication was written at the request of the informal European Council meeting at Hampton Court (UK) and fully endorsed at the June 2006 formal meeting in Brussels. The recently adopted Commission Green Paper re-launching the European Research Area³ has also made the broad modernisation agenda for universities a key element in achieving the goals of the European Research Area.

Many of the measures listed directly refer to the Bologna agenda: comparable qualifications (short cycle, bachelor, master, doctorate); flexible, modernised curricula at all levels which correspond to the needs of the labour market; support to international and intersectoral mobility for students, researchers and teaching staff; trustworthy quality assurance systems; and reinforcement of the international dimension of the EHEA.

Institutions of higher education need to be proactive with regard to the implementation of these measures. This can be supported by targeted incentives from the relevant national authorities to ensure that actions go beyond mere superficial compliance with standards. Curricula in specific disciplines or professions should be revised to ensure employability and inter-sectoral mobility of graduates, drawing on comparisons and best practice at European level and the management of human resources should support international and intersectoral mobility, including through flexible, open and transparent international recruitment procedures.

The Commission works with Member States and the higher education sector to help implement the modernisation agenda through what is called the Open Method of Coordination (involving dialogue among clusters of policy makers and experts, peer-learning activities, indicators, benchmarks, reports and analyses), by taking special initiatives (Quality Assurance, ECTS, EQF, EIT etc.) and by supporting the initiatives of others (pilot projects, associations, networks etc.) through the Lifelong Learning Programme⁴. The Commission also works to support this modernisation agenda through the implementation of the Community Lisbon Programme, the 7th EU Framework Programme for Research and the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme, as well as the Structural Funds and EIB loans.

This year, Commission services will take steps to further promote dialogue and cooperation between universities and the world of enterprise.

5. The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)

Building on the progress made in the context of the Bologna and the Copenhagen processes and following an extensive public consultation process, the Commission presented a proposal for the establishment of a European Qualifications Framework in September 2006, which will encompass all levels of education and training and promote mobility and lifelong learning. The proposed EQF is fully compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European

³ " The European Research Area: New Perspectives", COM(2007) 161 final of 4.4.2007

⁴ A more detailed overview is provided in the paper "From Bergen to London, the contribution of the European Commission to the Bologna Process" <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/bologna/report05.pdf>

Higher Education Area. The Commission is confident that the Recommendation establishing the EQF will be formally adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in 2007 and has started to support the development of national qualification frameworks, already under way in many countries. The Commission will particularly support the compatibility of approaches between higher education and other areas of education and training within a lifelong learning perspective.

6. Next steps and future issues

The Commission works with Member States, experts and stakeholders in monitoring progress in modernising higher education. Thus it is working with the Portuguese Presidency of the Council to organise a conference in the Autumn which will examine the state of play of reforms, exchange experiences and assess the degree to which reforms have reached grassroots level, institutions, researchers, teaching staff and students.

Material to contribute to such reviews of progress will be provided through Eurydice⁵, Eurostat and specially commissioned studies. The monitoring of higher education reforms over longer periods of time will be underpinned by the use of the coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks covering the area of education and training as a whole which was set out in a recent Commission Communication⁶. The list of indicators outlined there includes, inter alia, Member States' performances as regards higher education graduates, mobility, investment in higher education sector, participation of adults in lifelong learning and educational attainment of the population. A benchmark has been agreed with a view to raising the number of graduates in mathematics, science and technology.

The issue of the legal status and working conditions of doctoral candidates and young researchers needs to be addressed. Future work in this area could be based on the principles set out in the Commission *Recommendation on the European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers*.

Furthermore, legal, administrative and financial disincentives to mobility in such fields as migration and visa policies (in line with EU visa directives), complementary pension rights and social security need to be addressed. Data gathering on the mobility of students, researchers and teaching staff needs to be improved.

Achieving the goals of the European Higher Education Area requires substantial efforts from governments, institutions, students and staff. Moreover, these same efforts also play an important role towards the goals of the European Research Area. Good progress has been made so far and there is strong commitment at national, regional and institutional level to maintain this momentum. The European Commission has played an important role in supporting this process. It is now for Ministers in London to take decisive steps to move further ahead.

⁵ 2007 Eurydice Focus on Structures in Higher Education, 2007 Eurydice Key data and Eurydice Survey on governance and funding

⁶ A coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training COM(2007) 61 final of 21.12.2007
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0061en01.pdf