

Making Bologna Work: Free Movement in Higher Education!

What does “Bologna 2020” need for enhancing international access, mobility, and attractiveness of research and academia in the common European Higher Education Area.

The discussion on higher education reform in Europe is entering a new phase. Until now, it has been – and will continue to be – characterized by demands to increase competitiveness, cooperation, internationality, and permeability between and within the diverse European higher education systems. If we needed to summarize these demands into one key phrase, it would clearly be: the promotion and facilitation of mobility in the European higher education area, both for students and for staff. The new phase, to a great extent, has been triggered by the previous phase, in the sense that there is still a way to go in reaching the reform goals. For instance, the restructuring of degree programmes, though a major step in the direction of better recognition and comparability, has not and, certainly by itself, could not have delivered the desired impetus to mobility. Indeed, it has become clear that a number of external restrictions such as immigration barriers, nationally defined social benefits, and the ever lasting entrenchment of the state in higher education must be addressed as well, should Europe truly aspire to improve the appeal, performance and reputation of its higher education institutions on the global stage. If Europe fails to respond accordingly, it risks losing its attractiveness in the competition for desperately needed academic professionals.

It is against this background that the new role of academic and research staff mobility and innovation becomes evident. To be sure, enhancing staff mobility ultimately means reducing all kinds of barriers. It also provides a way for securing a highly qualified labour force. Moreover, improved parameters for mobility would enable a more intense knowledge and experience transfer, stronger competitiveness in the HE ‘market’, while cultivating the ethos of cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

The German Rectors’ Conference (HRK), together with international participants, has addressed precisely these issues during its official Bologna Seminar on National Pension Schemes as an Obstacle to Mobility for Researchers (12-13 June, 2008 in Berlin). As a result of the discussions and the exchange of good practice examples, it concluded to propose that the Ministers make the question of transferable or portable pensions an eminent part of the so-called “social dimension” of the Bologna Process without neglecting free moving students or researchers lacking employment status. In this respect, the Ministers need to secure the higher education institutions’

autonomy, not only in curricular matters but also in financial terms. Furthermore, the national social systems and institutions should be encouraged to make the universities truly independent employers and fully responsible for its entire staff, independently of its current individual status (employed researcher, doctorate student, fellow with a grant etc.).

As discussed in the conference, the heart of the issue is that mobile scientists have a special need for rapidly available, reliable and transparent information on social security issues in order to be informed of the repercussions of their mobility on their financial situation in the future and particularly in old age. Due to the non-transparent and often mutually incompatible rules of the national pension schemes and of different national taxation regimes, mobile scientists are in an unfavourable situation and are in fact often financially "penalised" for their mobility. Higher education institutions of the EHEA and pension providers should take responsibility for offering consistent, accessible and transparent information and advise on all pensions related issues, allowing university staff to take decisions on future geographical or inter-sectoral moves. Existing advisory models have to be analysed and improved in a European exchange of experience and best practice.

Promoting a better and more efficient "Bologna" implementation of academic staff mobility entails a number of factors/steps:

- Raising awareness of this issue on multiple levels (within national and regional administrations, higher education and research associations, and individual institutes)
- Providing adequate pension schemes, irrespective of whether offered by state or privately, must meet the high ethical standards and necessities of higher education and research institutes
 - e.g. the concept of a European pension fund for researchers (for supplementary pensions) based on the IORP Directive of the European Council and the European Parliament of 2003;
 - this concept of cross-border funds can be organised either from the private sector or in the form of a public-private partnership
- Rethinking governments' involvement and applying more market-oriented approaches and solutions to mobility problems, e.g.
 - create package deals allowing individual approaches for HEI to raise awareness in their departments and invite individual researchers to think of ways to secure retirement
 - provide for higher financial predictability of pension funds for mobile researchers

- create a tool for surveying national pension rights through a National Pension Register. As a pilot for mobile teaching and research staff the register would consist of a data bank and a user friendly, internet based application to be accessed at any time with a password to receive reliable information on pension rights.
- customize to the specific needs to mobile researchers and students
- Retracting the state regulation of higher education, and thus overcoming the limits of national traditions, and instead,
- Favouring a true partnership model between HEI, the state and providers

Competitive advantage through competitive nature

These proposals constitute but a few fundamental possibilities for opening the internal market for this highly specialized and scarce professional sector, for the sake of their own career development, but more fundamentally, because Europe as a whole would gain from their potential as creators of change and innovation. To be sure, the high degree of government regulation of higher education and study, but moreover the employment conditions tend to be designed more for "civil service" and *not* for the needs of modern universities and research. In overcoming long-established national restrictions, while preserving the constructive elements of their traditions, Europe can benefit from the added value of globalization and, through a stronger competitive dynamic of its higher education institutions, would gain its competitive advantage.