

**BOLOGNA FOLLOW-UP SEMINAR**

**“EXPLORING THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS  
OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA”**

Athens, Greece  
19-20 February 2003  
Divani Caravel Hotel

**GENERAL REPORT**

**Bologna Follow-up Seminar**  
**"Exploring the Social Dimensions of the European Higher  
Education Area"**  
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**General Report**

## **1. Introduction**

The seminar focused on three main issues and the challenges they pose for the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These three issues are: (1) the social dimension of the EHEA, (2) higher education as a public good and (3) higher education in the GATS negotiations. Each of these three issues were dealt with in the answers to the questionnaire that was sent out by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs before the seminar, were analysed by several speakers and were the topic of working group discussions. This draft report tries to put forward a generally acceptable synthesis of questionnaire answers, speakers' input and working group results for the three main issues. At the same time it makes some careful proposals of passages to be included in the communiqué that the European ministers of education will agree upon at their next ministerial summit in September 2003 in Berlin.

## **2. The social dimension of the EHEA**

### *Starting points*

The European ministers of education didn't mention the social dimension in their Bologna Declaration. In their Prague Communiqué on the contrary they stressed the social dimension several times. Firstly they mentioned it in a general way under the heading "Higher education institutions and students": "Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna Process." Secondly they referred to it on two specific occasions, on the one hand under the heading "Promotion of mobility": "Therefore, they (...) emphasized the social dimension of mobility.", on the other under the heading "Lifelong learning": "(...) lifelong learning strategies are necessary (...) to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life." They encouraged the follow-up group to organise a seminar on the "social dimension, with specific attention to obstacles to mobility" to explore the topic further.

Furthermore it must be remembered that all the signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration have signed and ratified the "United Nations Covenant on Economical, Social and Cultural Rights". Article 13 of this Covenant is directly relevant for the social dimension of the EHEA: "Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education."

One of the overall goals of higher education is to enhance social cohesion and equity. This goal should therefore also be central in the creation of the EHEA. To be able to achieve this goal it is essential to take into account the social dimension of higher education, to elaborate and implement appropriate policies and to agree upon and co-ordinate European-wide action lines.

Two policy levels can be discerned. Firstly all signatory countries should share some characteristics on social student policy. Secondly some specific European policy initiatives could be developed.

### *Shared characteristics*

The social student policy of all the signatory countries should be aimed at allowing those persons who have the capacities and the will to study to actually access and finish higher education studies. To achieve this aim activities have to be deployed in two domains.

The first domain is that of access to higher education, meaning access to both the first cycle and the second cycle.

- Equal and free access should be guaranteed. This means that access policies can only be based on merit and capacities. Furthermore it is clear that tuition fees can form severe access thresholds. In correspondance with article 13 of the UN Covenant they should be eliminated or at least be reduced to as low an amount as possible. Equal and free access should not only be guaranteed for the traditional student but also for non-traditional students such as older and/or employed persons. For these the developments of flexible learning paths and the introduction of an ECTS compatible credit accumulation system are essential features. Also alternative delivery modes could prove to be very useful.
- Not only should equal and free access be guaranteed, participation of underrepresented or socially disadvantaged groups should also be enhanced. Special attention should be devoted to persons stemming from lower socio-economic classes, ethnic minorities, immigrants, disabled persons, etc. Their situation and background is very complex. Therefore structural policies are required which should at least contain special financial incentives and flexible learning paths.
- Essential in the access and participation debate are decent information campaigns. It is clear that co-ordination and co-operation between secondary and higher education are needed here.

The second domain is that of the social support for those students who are studying in higher education. Essential is that an adequate social student infrastructure is set up that will allow every student to finish his or her studies on time and with the biggest welfare possible. This social student infrastructure is amongst others made up of:

- a performative financial support system
- decent housing facilities
- encompassing social security coverage
- accessible health care
- relevant academic, social and legal guidance and counselling
- supportive job and career services.

Next to this a constant fight against drop-out rates should be waged. Appropriate counselling is important here. But as important is once more the introduction of flexible learning paths and an ECTS compatible credit accumulation system.

The development of a social student policy in these two domains is a joint responsibility of governments and higher education institutions. In a higher education environment characterised by institutional autonomy the higher education institutions have to actively contribute to the enhancement of social cohesion and equity.

### *The European level*

The Bologna Declaration contained action lines on the "promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance" and the "promotion of the European dimension in higher education". Likewise in the future development of the EHEA a European approach and European co-operation in the social dimension should be promoted.

It is clear that there is no need whatsoever for a common European social student support system. But there is a well-defined need for consultation and concertation within the EHEA on the aims and goals of the social student policy. The way each country implements the aims and goals agreed upon in this process of consultation and concertation is a matter of national sovereignty. The Bologna Process offers an ideal occasion for such a process of consultation and concertation.

In the EHEA there exists an enormous and rich diversity in access and social support policies. There is a clear need for more but above all more qualitative information on this diversity. Euro-Stud is for instance a good example of an attempt to offer such information. Nevertheless it should be enlarged to all Bologna signatory countries and the information provided should become more analytical and comparative. The collection and dissemination of best practices in access and social support policies should also be stimulated. Moreover there is also a clear need for more comparable policy criteria. Just as ENQA receives study assignments in the field of European co-operation in quality assurance it should be considered to give for instance ECSTA comparable study assignments which deal with the aforementioned topics.

In the Prague Communiqué the ministers of education specifically stressed the social dimension in relation to student mobility. Social aspects are indeed very often considerable thresholds to European student mobility. These threshold resulting from social aspects could be tackled by the following measures:

- clearer and more targeted information on student mobility opportunities
- portability of all financial student support albeit under certain conditions
- equal access for mobile students to the social support systems of the countries where they are studying
- specific measures to improve the participation of disadvantaged social groups, especially students originating from the lower socio-economic strata, to student mobility
- solidarity in the EHEA to fight the current disparity between European countries which very often hinders student mobility: this could be done by devising some sort of mechanism by which the wealthier countries in the EHEA assist the relatively less wealthy countries.

### *Conclusion*

In the Prague Communiqué attention was drawn to the social dimension of the EHEA. The Berlin Communiqué must follow up this dimension and treat the different elements which make it up more intensively.

Therefore it is proposed to include the three following paragraphs in the Berlin Communiqué.

The preamble should state: "The Ministers reaffirm the importance of the social dimension of the process in the construction of a European Higher Education Area. They point towards the importance in this matter of article 13 of the UN Covenant on Economical, Social and Cultural Rights."

A specific paragraph should be added on the social dimension of the EHEA stating:  
"A European approach and European co-operation in the social dimension

To be able to contribute to bigger social cohesion and equity the Ministers stress that higher education in the EHEA should be equally and freely accessible. Equally accessible means that everyone who has the capacities should be able to access higher education. Freely accessible means that higher education should be as free of cost as possible, tending towards gratuity. Moreover the Ministers state that participation of underrepresented and/or disadvantaged groups in higher education must be enlarged. Financial incentives, flexible learning paths and the introduction of an ECTS compatible credit accumulation system are useful measures to this end. Furthermore the Ministers emphasize the introduction and maintenance of a qualitative social student support policy consisting of performative financial support systems, decent housing facilities, encompassing social security coverage, accessible health care, relevant academic, social and legal guidance and counselling, supportive job and career services, etc. Finally the Ministers believe that a structural fight against drop out rates via flexible curricula and degree structures is of the utmost importance. The implementation of these policies is a shared responsibility of governments and institutions.

The Ministers also recognise the need for more but above all more qualitative information on the diversity of access and social student support policies in the EHEA. Furthermore they request the collection and dissemination of best practices in access and social support policies. Moreover they recognise the clear need for more comparable policy criteria. By 2005 they would like to ask ECSTA to execute study assignments which deal with the aforementioned topics."

The paragraph on the promotion of mobility should contain the following sentences:

"To counter thresholds to European student mobility which result from the socio-economical background of students the Ministers propose the following measures: the portability of all financial student support albeit under certain conditions, equal access for mobile students to the social support systems of the countries where they are studying and the implementation of solidarity mechanisms in the EHEA to balance the effects on student mobility of the existing disparity between European countries."

### **3. Higher education as a public good**

#### *Starting points*

In the Bologna Declaration the ministers of education did not explicitly express their view on the question if higher education has to be considered a public good. They did so in the Prague Communiqué where they stated in the introductory remarks: "They (the ministers) supported the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility (regulations etc.) (...)."

Relevant here is also the fact that higher education can be considered to be a human right. This is made clear in the aforementioned article 13 of the "United Nations Covenant on Economical, Social and Cultural Rights".

### *Definitions*

A main point of discussion has been the definition of higher education as public good. From an economical point of view a public good has the following characteristics: (1) it is available to all, (2) it is not subject to competition and (3) it is not subject to exclusion. As such it opposes a so-called commodity which has as defining characteristics: (1) it is only available to a limited number of persons and (2) it is subject to market laws. Throughout discussions it became clear that higher education cannot entirely be considered to be a public good in the economical sense of the word, neither is it entirely a commodity. It is probably a mixed good.

Nevertheless as some speakers stressed an economical point of view is only one way of approaching the reality of higher education as a public good. There is also a political-ideological approach to the question. Important elements of this approach are the conception of higher education as a fundamental human right and as a public service. This vision is a much more voluntaristic notion. It majorly depends on the consequences of higher education, on the societal aims, goals and functions we ascribe to higher education.

Tradition plays a big part here. Higher education institutions are traditionally places of knowledge transfer that form their students to become independent minds that look critically at the world and the society surrounding them. Higher education institutions are also centres of knowledge creation in a spirit of academic freedom with a special stress on independent fundamental research. This tradition, part of the university heritage, is worth preserving.

At the same time modernity determines the aims, goals and functions of higher education. In this view higher education can become through massification and participation a lever for social change, social mobility and social cohesion. *Vis à vis* a political understanding of higher education as a public good this modernist approach is still considered to be of extreme importance.

### *Consequences*

One of the major consequences of considering higher education as a public good is that higher education becomes a public responsibility. It was agreed upon that this is probably a more important and fruitful approach than the definitional discussion about higher education as a public good. Higher education as a public responsibility clearly means that both the tasks of governments and higher education are determined by it.

One of the speakers nicely synthesized the meaning of public responsibility for the government. His interpretation finds support in the Prague Communiqué itself where the ministers of education mentioned one example of the public responsibility, *id est* the regulating of higher education. Governments have the sole responsibility for defining the framework of higher education. They have a main responsibility for assuring equal access to higher education. They have an important role to play in the provision of higher education and in the financing of higher education. Next to this they have a shared responsibility for assuring the quality of higher education. This is clearly considered to be the counterpart of equal access. Massified higher education needs to stay qualitative. Else it is a useless exercise.

Higher education institutions have to operate in an environment that is getting more globalised, commercialised and therefore competitive every day. It would be useless to deny

this reality. When positioning themselves in this environment they have to keep in mind that also they, in a higher education area that is defined by relative autonomy, carry an important part of the public responsibility for higher education. Their policies have to be coherent with this responsibility. They also have to contribute to assure equal access to higher education. They have to take care of their fundamental research, *eg* via an overhead policy on contract research. They play an important part in quality assurance and they have to be accountable to government, parliament and society at large.

### *Conclusion*

The Berlin Communiqué should stress once more the fact that higher education is a public good and stays a public responsibility. It should elaborate more on the roles that the different higher education actors play in realising these contentions in practice. Finally it is very clear that everybody expects that the ministers of education will guarantee adequate public funding of higher education.

## **4. Higher education in the GATS negotiations**

### *Considerations*

Participants took notice of the emerging global market for higher education services as well as developments in trading these services in the framework of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) within the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Participants also noted the increasing trend towards global competition in higher education. However, they reaffirmed that the main objective driving the creation of the EHEA and the internationalisation of HE on a global level, should first and foremost be based on academic values and co-operation between different countries and regions of the world.

Several participants further stressed the announcement of the European Commission to not include (public) education in their negotiation proposal for the ongoing GATS negotiations as a positive development. The majority also welcomed the efforts of keeping the commitments of the EU limited to entirely privately funded and/or for-profit education services.

### *Principles*

While there were different viewpoints expressed as to how GATS might affect the higher education sector, participants agreed on a number of principles which should be guidelines in discussing the ongoing WTO negotiations.

Considering the commitment to Higher Education as a public good and responsibility in the Prague Communiqué, also affirmed in various UN and UNESCO agreements, participants reaffirmed this commitment and stressed that any negotiations about trade in education services must not jeopardise the responsibility of financing the public education sector. They further stressed, that recognition agreements and the right of countries to implement quality assurance mechanisms should not be put in question by the GATS negotiations.

Generally, participants felt that the potentials to develop future and maintain existing regulatory and funding frameworks on national and international level have to be guaranteed in the light of the GATS negotiations.

Participants also felt that it is necessary to develop alternative frameworks for internationalisation within the Bologna Process and the international arena based on academic co-operation, trust and respect for diversity.

Furthermore, it seems necessary to assess the impact of GATS on education systems from a legal perspective, also taking into account the role of higher education in society. Lastly, it was stressed, that the transparency of the negotiations needs to be increased and an inclusion of the stakeholders is necessary. *Per analogiam* if one day "trade" disputes concerning educational services would arise under the WTO dispute settlement procedure educational experts should be consulted and involved in settling these cases.

### *Conclusion*

It is suggested that a text proposal on European higher education and GATS is elaborated for inclusion in the Berlin Communiqué by the next meeting of the Bologna Follow-up Group in June 2003 taking into account all the aforementioned considerations. In any case it is clear that the European ministers of education have to insert a joint statement on GATS in their next communiqué.

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20 February 2003, Athens (first draft)  
25 February 2003, Leuven (final draft)