

The academic convention 'Shaping our own future in the European Higher Education Area' took place in Salamanca, Spain, on 28–30 March 2001. Andrejs Rauhvargers reports.

THE RESPONSE OF UNIVERSITIES TO THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION AND FORMULATION OF THE WAY FORWARD

'Shaping our own future in the European Higher Education Area'

by Andrejs Rauhvargers

The Salamanca convention gathered more than 600 participants from the European academic community. The convention was immediately followed by the merger of the CRE: Association of European Universities and the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences, forming the new European Universities' Association (EUA).

Twofold mission

The Salamanca convention had a twofold mission. Firstly, representatives of the academic world from all of the signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration (signed by the ministers of 29 countries in 1999) were present, and they could jointly give a response to the principles formulated in the Declaration. The response was a clear 'yes'. Secondly, the academic community analysed the results achieved during the first two years of the implementation of the Bologna Declaration, 'The European Higher Education Area', and formulated its recommendations for the ministerial meeting in Prague on 17–18 May 2001 where the further steps in the Bologna follow-up process will be agreed at governmental level.

The discussion at Salamanca was organised around six main topics: freedom with responsibility, employability, mobility, compatibility, quality, and competitiveness. Presentation of the results of the new survey *Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education II*¹ was very useful as the background information for the discussions at Salamanca.

The main results of the discussions were the following.²

Freedom with responsibility

This part of the discussion resulted in a formulation of the universities' view of the aspects of autonomy they need to be able to adjust rapidly to the changes of the 'environment'. This autonomy concerns: strategic planning, setting goals; allocation of funds; selecting their partners in research and in teaching; selecting the research areas; definition of curricula; hiring the professoriate; selecting students. Relations with the government should be based upon mutual trust and partnership, but intellectual autonomy is still a requirement.

Employability of graduates in the European labour market

Universities see employability as a necessity, therefore study programmes have to be valid academically and relevant to the labour market. This means that curricula and study courses must be flexible and they must meet well-defined targets. Introduction of first cycle programmes is important because of the growing number of students. However, a two-cycle model is meaningful only if employability is given after both the first and second degree.

Curriculum development should be carried out with a view of life-long employability and flexibility of students as well as of programmes. Employability, espe-

cially after the first cycle of studies, should not always be seen as having a sufficient amount of concrete professional knowledge and skills, but rather as the ability to approach and to solve a problem systematically and methodically applying substantial knowledge. Institutions of higher education should contribute to transparency and recognition by explaining their programmes and the competencies they strive for in a way that is meaningful for students and employers. The institutions should prepare the students for job searching and managing their careers.

Mobility

Mobility is a central value of the European Higher Education Area. In order to overcome the obstacles to mobility, more emphasis should be put on the means of fostering recognition: application of ECTS both for exchange and for accumulation; ratification and application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention by all the countries of the European Higher Education Area; wide use of the Diploma Supplement as a means for transparency of the qualifications; the experience and capacity of the European recognition networks ENIC and NARIC should be widely used. Particularly physical mobility should be promoted as an educational experience,

which cannot be replaced by virtual mobility. It requires removal of administrative barriers and obstacles to mobility as well as making portable grants and loans available to students, and other suitable incentives to both individuals and institutions. Teaching staff with international experience, as well as a realistic language provision and good information to students are of crucial importance.

Compatibility – a common but flexible qualifications framework

Taking into account the main developments in the Bologna process, the recommendation of the Salamanca convention is that higher education has to be structured so that students should be eligible for a Bachelor-level degree leading to a Master-level degree after completion of programmes of three to four years' duration (180–240 ECTS credits). In special cases a university may decide to structure a curriculum on the basis of a five-year integrated programme leading directly to a Master-level degree. Discipline networks have an important role in such decisions. Using ECTS for credit accumulation should help in awarding credits for assessed learning gained both inside and outside the university. The universities have the right to decide whether credits

gained outside are acceptable. In addition, awarding credits for learning outside the university is subject to the requirements of regulated professions.

Quality assurance and accreditation

The current globalisation trends in higher education and the challenges of building a European Higher Education Area also require internationalisation of quality assurance. An answer to these challenges is accreditation, and quality assurance mechanisms are a pre-requisite for establishing proper accreditation procedures.

The internationalisation of quality assurance should, on the one hand, ensure quality in the European higher education area; on the other hand, it should preserve national and international diversity and autonomy. In other words, while the decisions are taken nationally, converging procedures and principles should be advised to the national bodies leading to mutual trust in the results of quality assurance.

The main recommendation of the Salamanca meeting in this respect is that a European Platform should be created as a coordinating body to disseminate good practice, advise accrediting bodies on appropriate procedures and foster the convergence of principles and procedures

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in Europe. A steering committee should be set up for the establishment of the platform, together with ENQA student organisations, academic organisations and the stakeholders no later than September 2001.

Competitiveness at home and in the world

Competition is a driving force in higher education, as it is elsewhere, and is ultimately good for students and institutions and as such should be promoted. To enter true competition, universities need more operational freedom and a fair financing scheme. Competitiveness cannot be reduced to a commercial concept only; in the first place it means academic quality. Competition problems arise between Europe and other parts of the world, eg an imbalance between the number of European students studying overseas and overseas students studying in Europe, as well as within Europe, eg East versus West, inner European brain drain etc. Becoming globally more competitive requires more openness, transparency and competition at home as well as a revision of our service and marketing cultures, building at the same time upon the realities of European higher education, such as cultural diversity, research orientation and social responsibility. The following specific measures were proposed to foster competitiveness: introduction of study programmes taught in major world languages, more marketing on non-European markets (and joint European efforts in this area), developing educational trade marks and brands, European higher education institutions have to be perceived as welcoming insti-

tutions, competition with other continents through strategic networking within Europe.

EAIE conference in Tampere

The Salamanca gathering clearly showed that the universities and their organisations are willing and capable to take the lead in the work required for the process initiated by the Bologna Declaration. Since the signing of the Bologna Declaration, the EAIE has served as a platform for discussion of the principles and implications of the Declaration and dissemination of the first results in the path towards a European Higher Education Area. At the 2001 EAIE conference in Tampere, a number of sessions will again be devoted to the developments in the process in the light of the Salamanca academic convention and the ministerial meeting in Prague. A special session at Tampere will be devoted to the new European Universities' Association (EUA) and the national Rectors' conferences within it. ■

1 by Guy Haug and Christian Tauch, see www.eaie.org and www.salamanca2001.org.

2 Salamanca 2001. Conclusions by the Rapporteur, Professor Konrad Osterwalder.

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Towards the European Area of Higher Education: a joint project

by Barbara Weitgruber

The Follow-up Report prepared for the academic convention in Salamanca and the ministers' conference in Prague by Guy Haug and Christian Tauch, the *Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education II* report,¹ clearly shows that the Bologna Declaration has initiated a process of discussions on reforms in higher education across Europe.

All signatory countries have designated national contact points for the follow-up of the Bologna Declaration and reform efforts are under way in all the signatory countries. This does not mean, of course, that reforms are being implemented because the Bologna Declaration was signed, but the Declaration can reconfirm and enhance national reform priorities. When seeing national reform discussion in the light of the Bologna Declaration and the European trends reflected by it, the aims of the Declaration can serve as a guidance and facilitator for change. Some reform projects might – in this process – be amended or accelerated.

As the Bologna Declaration has been embedded in the overall European developments in higher education, ministries and higher education institutions can benefit from complementary developments when implementing its aims (eg European Course Credit Transfer System/ECTS, Diploma Supplement, NARIC/ENIC Network, European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).

The Bologna process is not limited to the signatories, however, but also has an impact on non-signatory countries. When elaborating reform projects for their systems of higher education, both ministries responsible for higher educa-

tion and institutions of higher education in south-eastern Europe, regard the overall aims of the Bologna Declaration as important guiding principles.

Still, the Bologna Process has even more far-reaching effects: the discussions regarding the development of a European Higher Education Area do not go unnoticed internationally. The declaration of the ministers of the European Union and the ministers from Latin America and the Caribbean in charge of higher education at their joint conference in Paris on 3 November 2000, for instance, refers to the future development of a joint Latin American–Caribbean–European Area of Higher Education. This is only one sign for the growing awareness of international partners for the joint European efforts. The recently concluded agreements between the European Community and the United States of America and between the European Community and Canada renewing a cooperation programme in higher education and training also reflect a stronger interest of the transatlantic partners in European developments.

For the future development of the process it will be vital that the Ministers agree on a clear follow-up procedure at the Prague conference. On the one hand, the coordination at European level needs to be defined (so far, there has already been a small steering group and a large group consisting of the small steering group, the national Bologna Follow-up Contact points and additional representatives of organisations); on the other hand, there also needs to be a concrete schedule for follow-up meetings and agreement of the major themes to be dealt with in more detail.

Barbara Weitgruber emphasises that it is vital that Ministers agree a clear follow-up procedure in Prague – and that the impact of the Bologna Declaration is not limited to the signatories.

The conclusions of the conferences leading up to the Salamanca convention,² and the outcome of the six working groups at the convention in Salamanca 'Shaping our own future in the European Higher Education Area' as well as the report *Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education II* show considerable progress for many of the aims of the Bologna Declaration; at the same time they indicate that more efforts are still needed in the areas of quality assurance, evaluation and accreditation. While the impetus for the Bologna Declaration predominantly came from governments, it was clear from the very beginning that the aims of the Declaration can only be implemented in

a partnership between all actors concerned. At the convention in Salamanca, the higher education institutions voiced their clear commitment to the Bologna process.

The success of the Bologna process will largely depend on the ability of both ministries and higher education institutions to steer the process together based on mutual trust and partnership and to adequately involve all actors concerned, especially the students.

The Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Prague on 19 May 2001 will be an important guidance in this respect. ■

1 This report is available on the EAIE website, www.eaie.org, and at www.salamanca2001.org

2 For further information see www.salamanca2001.org, and also the article by Andrejs Rauhvargers on pages 6–8.

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The Bologna process also has an impact on non-signatory countries

We will bring you more news on the outcome of the Prague meeting and progress in the Bologna/Prague process in the autumn issue of *Forum*.