

**EUA CONVENTION OF EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS,  
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***MAKING EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION A WORLDWIDE REFERENCE***

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**EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER FOR EDUCATION AND CULTURE**

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Professor Froment, President of the EUA  
Rectors and representatives of the European Higher Education Sector,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Two years after Salamanca, I am very happy to come to Graz and address the second EUA Convention of European Higher Education Institutions. The other Convention, the political one on the future European Constitution, wants Europe to continue with education and training cooperation. I am sure you will agree with them, as did the young people I met when we celebrated one million Erasmus students in October last year.

I am pleased to see that the EUA has made such a good start as a new organisation of both individual universities and their national organisations. I am also pleased that this particular Convention gathers a broad variety of higher education institutions, universities, colleges and polytechnics as well as Ministries of Education.

In my presentation, I will address these audiences: the higher education institutions and national governments. I will also indicate what I expect to happen at European level. I will therefore concentrate on three important themes:

- ◆ The emergence of a European Qualifications Framework
- ◆ What universities can do to open to up to the wider world
- ◆ What I expect from the Ministers in Berlin

***Challenges***

Allow me to say a few words on the challenges European higher Education is faced with. There is the challenge of globalisation (the co-existence of for profit- and non for profit education, allowed for by the General Agreement on trade in Services (GATS) in the WTO framework). Then we have the demographic challenge (ageing, immigration), the challenge to provide good quality teaching and research and - as a consequence - the challenge to modernise the system of higher education.

Governments and universities across Europe respond to these challenges in different ways. The Bologna process is an attempt to coordinate these responses through a package of structural reforms, notably the introduction of the two cycle system, credit transfer and quality assurance.

The Bologna Declaration adopted by the Higher Education Ministers in June 1999 has set in motion a series of reforms badly needed to make European higher education more coherent, more competitive and more attractive for European citizens and for students and scholars from abroad. Reforms are needed because European Higher Education is lagging behind. Compared to the United States, Europe

is lagging behind in public and private investment in higher education. It is also lagging behind in the number and level of incoming students from other continents.

The Bologna reforms are supported enthusiastically by the Commission. In fact, the Bologna agenda coincides with Commission policy in higher education, supported consistently over the years through programmes such as Socrates-Erasmus. In our Action Plan *'From Prague to Berlin, the EU Contribution'*, you will find a series of concrete measures to bring the Bologna process further, and to help modernise European higher education. Let's have a look at some of the key issues of Bologna.

### **The emergence of a European Qualifications Framework**

What we are aiming at with the introduction of the two cycle system, facilitating mobility and recognition across Europe, is in fact the creation of a 'Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area'. Within some single countries such a framework exists already. In such countries, qualifications are well-known to everybody and clearly described in terms of level and expected learning outcomes. Learners know what they will be trained for, what competences, knowledge and skills they will acquire. It is possible to move from one level to another under certain well-specified conditions. Non-formal and informal learning, like self-study or work experience is not lost, but validated and can be used, if so desired, as building blocks for a formal qualification later in life.

I believe that we should build on these positive national experiences and work towards a 'European Qualifications Framework'. We have the right ingredients for this: a system of two or three cycles, transparency instruments, a common language of competences and quality assurance. Let us take a closer look at all of these ingredients.

#### A system of two or three cycles

In almost all signatory states, laws have been passed that allow for the introduction of the two-cycle system. Countries that have not yet done so should hurry if they want to be part of the European Higher Education Area by 2010. Legal permission, however, is not enough. In some countries, legal permission leads to a semi-permanent co-existence of old and new degree structures, creating more confusion in stead of less. I urge these countries to review their policies. Bologna cannot be implemented à la carte, it has to be done across the board and wholeheartedly. If not, the process will leave European higher education even less united than before.

This also implies that we need more coherence at European level as regards the length and function of the two cycles. Too often, bachelor and master degrees are seen as one and inseparable and not recognised as valid degrees in their own right. The Bologna seminars on bachelor and master degrees in Helsinki marked steps in the right direction but more needs to be done.

National and regional governments should set the conditions, legal, financial and otherwise. Real reforms, however, can only take place when these reforms are accepted and supported by the academic community, the institutional leadership, students and staff.

I have read with great interest the Commission supported 'TRENDS III Report' and I congratulate the EUA and the authors with this work. The draft report describes, in all honesty, the level of awareness or lack of awareness of Bologna reforms and the degree of their implementation. It shows that Bologna is gaining ground and that some countries and institutions have made remarkable progress. In too many cases, however, reforms are so far only plans or promises, without real steps to implement them. In a number of cases the necessary university autonomy is hampered by national legal constraints, blocking for example the award of double or joint degrees.

Funding is obviously an issue for Governments and universities alike to consider. In the long run, however, I believe that the price of not implementing the Bologna reforms would be higher for the institutions and for society as a whole.

While introducing the two-cycle system, we should not forget the short sub-cycle programmes (below the bachelor level) which play an important role in tertiary education in a number of countries. We must also not forget the doctoral level. Both are part of the continuum of lifelong learning. I welcome suggestions made to integrate both levels in the Bologna process. Together with my Colleague Commissioner Philippe Busquin, I will examine how to promote European cooperation at doctoral level, helping young researchers at the crossroads of education and research.

### Transparency instruments

You are all familiar, I hope, with the transparency instruments ECTS and Diploma Supplement. The European Credit Transfer System ECTS helps to describe programmes of study, to define student workload and to transfer credits for mobile students. More than one thousand universities have introduced ECTS in one or more departments, with Commission Socrates-Erasmus support.

Our ambition is now to give ECTS a system-wide effect, to make sure that all students from all departments get credits, not only the mobile happy few. The Ministers in Bologna have signed up to this ambition. The Rectors gathered by the EUA in Zurich last year acknowledged the role of ECTS for transparency, recognition and curriculum innovation.

This year, the Commission is introducing an 'ECTS label' for universities that use ECTS in all first and second cycle degree programmes. Next year the Commission will start with a pilot project to test a new 'ECTS for Lifelong Learning', which will help universities to award credits – at the appropriate level – to non-traditional learners, they decide to admit to their degree programmes. In addition, the Commission supports 30 country teams of ECTS Counsellors, coordinated by the EUA, which are standby to assist universities introducing ECTS and ECTS for lifelong learning.

Similar action is undertaken support the wider use of the Diploma Supplement. The Commission is also exploring how to integrate transparency instruments developed for vocational training (like Europass, European Portfolio and the European CV) with ECTS and the Diploma Supplement, developed originally for higher education. Integrating transparency instruments would make sense to the European citizens and employers.

It would also provide a concrete example of synergies between the Bologna process for higher education and the new Bruges-Copenhagen process for Vocational Education and Training, with due respect of course for the differences in scope and academic ambition of the institutions concerned.

Talking about transparency, I should forget the new Web Portal for learning opportunities PLOTEUS, launched by the Commission this year. PLOTEUS provides easy access to the web sites of your institution and other information in more and more detail and in more and more languages.

### The Common Language of Competences

Qualifications or diplomas can be described by their name in the national language, English or Latin. The learning behind can be made more transparent with ECTS and the use of the Diploma Supplement. Another and new way to increase transparency is to describe the outcomes of the studies, the so-called 'competences': what a learner knows in theory and is able to do in practice on the labour market.

Experts of the 'Joint Quality Initiative' have formulated generic competences they expect from bachelors and masters. The 135 universities gathered in the project supported by the Commission on '*Tuning Educational Structures in Europe*' are describing both generic and subject-specific competences for nine different subject areas and they discover that the competences we expect from graduates across Europe are not that different.

I find this competences approach extremely promising. It provides a common language for describing higher learning without interfering in the organisation of the university and the method of teaching. Agreement on core competences will facilitate comparison and recognition of degrees, whilst respecting the autonomy of the university and its capacity to innovate and experiment. Competence descriptors

will assist universities in curriculum development. They can also be used for the purpose of internal and external quality assurance.

Knowledge develops continuously through research as you know, and societal needs change overtime, so competences need regular updating. Here, Socrates-Erasmus Thematic Networks could play a role bringing together experts and stakeholders from academia and society.

### Quality assurance

Last but not least, we need sound quality assurance to build a European Qualifications Framework. Fortunately, we witness remarkable progress in this field. The good experience of the European Pilot projects launched by the Commission in the nineties convinced in 1998 the Council of Ministers to adopt a Recommendation on the Promotion of Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Since then, almost all countries have set up an external quality assurance system or laid the foundations for such a system. The European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies ENQA, whose members carry out regular external quality evaluations, is growing fast across in countries across the wider Europe. University networks and notably the EUA stimulate their members to develop an internal quality culture. The Commission encourages good practice in both internal and external quality assurance.

I believe time has come to go a step further. Ministers in Bologna called for ‘comparable criteria’ and ‘comparable methodologies’. Ministers in Prague called for a ‘common framework of reference’ and ‘scenarios’ to be developed. We can and should demonstrate progress in this central field.

This summer, the Commission will adopt a Report on the implementation of the 1998 Council Recommendation on co-operation in quality assurance in higher education, in which I will propose to make European quality assurance more coherent and more reliable.

I will propose to apply comparable methodologies in evaluations across Europe, based on the rich methodological experiences of the ENQA network members. I will also propose to apply comparable criteria in evaluations across Europe.

One set of comparable criteria would be to systematically evaluate the existence and effectiveness of sound internal quality assurance mechanisms within the universities concerned (in line with the EUA objective of institution building).

Another set of comparable criteria would be to evaluate the use of learning outcomes or competences: Has the university defined what the graduate is supposed to know in theory and able to do in practice on the labour market? Are these competences relevant for the field concerned? Are they properly described and assessed? Is the university doing a fair, a good or an excellent job in transmitting these competences to their students?

I will finally propose to integrate the national, regional and professional quality evaluation systems and arrive at a system of “meta-accreditation”, making quality assurance agencies themselves subject to periodical quality evaluation. Guidelines need to be established to ensure that external quality evaluation is fair and appropriate and leaves room for universities to experiment and innovate.

Any system of meta-accreditation would need to be designed carefully and include all relevant stakeholders from academia and society in order to ensure that legitimate interests are well represented. I welcome the support of the EUA to put this difficult subject back on the political agenda.

More coherence in quality assurance in Europe will also facilitate recognition of diplomas and periods of study. It will not be the magic solution, leading to automatic recognition in all cases, but it will help admission officers, credential evaluators and employers taking swifter and better informed recognition decisions.

A strong European framework for quality assurance, covering both public and private higher learning would bring transparency on quality and also help universities face the challenges posed by the co-

existence of for profit- and non for profit education, allowed for by the General Agreement on trade in Services (GATS) in the WTO framework. Despite the presence of for profit providers, education remains a public responsibility. Governments should create and maintain a framework for higher education, ensuring quality and equitable access.

In Conclusion, I believe we that a lot of work still needs to be done but that we have the ingredients to create a 'European Qualifications Framework'. National reforms combined with European initiatives such as ECTS and TUNING can make a big difference. The Recommendations of the recent Copenhagen Bologna Seminar on qualification structures, are very promising in this respect and have my full support.

### ***How universities can open up to the wider world***

The Bologna process is also an invitation to the higher education sector to open up to the wider world, to society that surrounds them and to other countries and continents. European Higher education should become more attractive for our own citizens and for students and scholars from abroad.

This means action for universities in the field of lifelong learning as well as setting out a European (and international) strategy.

### Lifelong learning

Universities should realise that the number of 18-24 year old campus students will decrease in the years to come. In the past few decades, universities were blessed by the growing overall participation rate in higher education and notably the advent of female students. In future, universities will have to open their doors to non-traditional learners or close down departments.

Universities should therefore rethink the way in which students enter and leave their institution and the type of courses on offer to them. They should consider providing courses at unusual hours (evenings and weekends), to unusual students (workers, adults) at unusual places (the workplace), using unusual techniques (distance learning and ICT).

Universities should create 'welcome centres' where they assess non-traditional learners, give advice on individual learning paths, decide on admission to full courses or individual modules, leading or not leading to a degree. Universities should try to be at the centre of what I call the 'learning region' establishing links with social partners and other education and training providers. Universities should of course make their educational offer transparent through ECTS, the Diploma Supplement and put their entire course offer on the Web

Each institution will have to define its own profile and position itself in the continuum of lifelong learning. Do I concentrate on the 18-24 year olds in my town or region? That is a legitimate choice, small is beautiful. Or do I widen my scope to welcome regular students and non-traditional learners from within my country. Does my institution want to be a European, or even an international player?

### Developing a European Strategy

I would encourage every university to consider its European profile, to examine which partners suit their own interests and future development best. For the sake of the mobile students, offering them an Erasmus experience they will cherish the rest of their life. However, the vast majority of students is non-mobile. I hope, with joint public and private effort, to increase the percentage of mobile students, which is now less than 5 % of graduates. But we all know that the majority of students will study and work solely in their own town or region.

These students will also be confronted in their private and professional life with other language and cultures. They also need to be prepared for an increasingly European environment. These students should also benefit from the European and international atmosphere you create at your institution, joining in the classroom with foreign students, learning languages, taking part in summer courses, being in contact with visiting or permanent professors from abroad.

They also will benefit from the fact that your universities are engaged in European projects and networks, in particular as regards the Socrates-Erasmus Thematic Networks, which nowadays exist in almost every field of study.

I also invite all universities to keep an keen eye on two new programmes the Commission hopes to see adopted by the end of the year. The first one is on E-learning. It aims to promote and facilitate the effective integration of information and communication technologies in European education and training systems through virtual campuses and the e-twinning of schools. The other programme is called 'Erasmus Mundus'.

Erasmus Mundus will allow the best students and scholars from other continents to follow joint master programmes, taught in different European countries, alongside their European counterparts. The programme is part of a broader effort of the Commission to establish an intercultural dialogue between the EU, its neighbouring regions and other continents.

Erasmus Mundus also means increased European cooperation in promoting the European higher education offer in the wider world. A marketing strategy is needed indeed to bring European quality and distinctiveness to the attention of the best partners, students and scholars in other continents.

The example of Erasmus Mundus will hopefully show that one way of becoming stronger as an individual institution is to cooperate and create consortia in order to pool resources in the delivery of joint degrees. These may be joint degrees at bachelor, master and at doctoral level.

Experiences with existing and new programmes and your comments will help the Commission to design a new generation of programmes that will run as from 2007.

Finally, I would recommend all universities to read the recent Commission Communication on the Role of the Universities in the Europe of knowledge<sup>1</sup> which raises a number of questions such as:

- ◆ how to achieve adequate and sustainable incomes for universities;
- ◆ how to ensure university autonomy;
- ◆ how to create the conditions within which universities can attain and develop excellence;
- ◆ how to make universities contribute better to local and regional needs;
- ◆ How to establish closer co-operation between universities and enterprises

I am grateful for the contribution the EUA and other organisations have made to this debate launched by this Communication and I am pleased to see that many of the questions raised in the Communication figure prominently on the agenda of this conference.

### **What I expect from the Ministers in Berlin**

I expect the Ministers in Berlin to mark a decisive step towards the creation a 'European Qualification Framework', allowing citizens to move from one learning opportunity to another with fair and swift recognition. This means that signatory states should proceed and establish national qualifications frameworks where they do not yet exist and co-operate in order to make sure that they fit the overall European framework.

It also means that the signatory states should do their 'Bologna homework' and set clear targets. For example: all signatory states should have started implementing the two cycles by 2005 (six years after Bologna). It also means that all stakeholders in quality assurance co-operate in the design of a system of meta-accreditation based on comparable methodologies and criteria.

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<sup>1</sup> The role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge. COM(2003) 58 final of 05.02.2003.

In this context would I also urge ministers to give special attention to the Europe-wide recognition of joint degrees starting with the Joint Masters: If three or more universities and countries recognise a joint degree, legal or I fact this degree should be recognised Europe-wide!

As regards mobility, I will also urge the Ministers to join forces with public and private sponsors in order to triple the number of Erasmus students by 2010.

And finally, I will also ask Ministers to make student loans and grants portable in order to enable their students to carry out short periods of study or full cycles in other European countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the potential in Europe is enormous. We have the biggest single market in the world. Thousands of universities produce knowledge and transmit their knowledge to hundreds of thousands of graduates every year. Many universities, many individual departments are world class. But we do not use our potential to the full. There are still too many barriers to the mobility of students, teachers and researchers. Universities do not co-operate enough, the transmission of new knowledge to the world of enterprise is not well organised and funding is often inadequate or used inefficiently.

I would expect the higher education sector represented at this Convention to take up these challenges and present a pro-active view on what universities should do to realise the Bologna reforms in order to face globalisation, to serve the learners of the future and contribute to the “Europe of knowledge”.

I wish you a most successful Convention.

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