

THE PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION:

PREPARATION FOR THE LABOUR MARKET

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I. The education agenda and economic/social priorities

European higher education has entered a major process of structural change related to the determination of its governments and universities to complete the creation of a coherent, compatible and competitive European higher education area by the year 2010 in the context of the Bologna process. Yet, this process of change has from the beginning put more emphasis on “qualifications” than on “degrees”: the origin and content of *the Bologna Declaration is easier to understand if it is read not as an academic document, but rather as an agenda for change in higher education driven by social and economic considerations. Within the EU it has also a strong link to the common European labour market.*

It is therefore not surprising that in addition to the structural reforms (BaMa, ECTS, Diploma Supplement) that are at the core of the Bologna reforms, two objectives have been gaining importance and may now have come to the top of the Bologna agenda: the need to promote the competitiveness and attractiveness of European universities in the world and the need to draw up a European framework of reference for qualifications, i.e. an instrument fostering the compatibility and cross-recognition of qualifications, whether for the purpose of further studies/training or access to the labour market.

It is interesting to point out that these two aspects have also become core concerns in recent initiatives taken within the EU’s Lisbon Strategy. At the same time as announcing the Union’s overall goal to become a leading knowledge-based economy and society, the European Council in 2000 emphasised that this was only possible with deep changes in social and educational systems. The Lisbon Strategy wants to create “more and better jobs” and at the same time to foster social integration and citizenship. This combination of goals underlies the work programme on the objectives of education and training systems (“Education and Training 2010”ⁱ) adopted in 2002. It wants to achieve “enough compatibility to allow citizens to take advantage” of Europe’s diversity (instead of being limited by it) and hopes that Europe will once again become “the most-favoured destination of students, scholars and researchers from other world regions”.

These goals are strongly related to the emergence of a real European labour market, which is bound to shape a good deal of the university offering and functioning in the years ahead. The combination that has existed in some countries between long study times, low graduation rates, high graduate unemployment and a shortage of qualified young people in key areas is unlikely to be accepted by society henceforward. This adds to the signals showing that

educational policy is less and less isolated from its context and is increasingly driven by economic and social issues.

II. Contributions of Bologna to the debate on “employability”

The Bologna process has had a strong and positive effect on the debate about the relationship between higher education and professional life, in particular concerning the preparation of graduates for the labour marketⁱⁱ. It has raised the profile of the issue and increased the awareness that the employability of graduates has become an increasingly important and shared concern all over Europe. A similar acknowledgement can be found in the EU’s “Education and Training 2010” work programme with respect to education/training systems as a whole, even though particular emphasis is placed on vocational education, lifelong learning and, interestingly, higher educationⁱⁱⁱ.

This has been acknowledged by universities, in particular in their Salamanca Message of 2001 which stated that “European higher education institutions recognise that their students need and demand qualifications which they can use effectively for the purpose of their studies and careers all over Europe” and universities “acknowledged their role and responsibility in this regard”.

On the government side, the meetings in Prague and Berlin gave Ministers an opportunity to put a number of issues in the centre of attention. In Prague they stressed the importance of lifelong learning and formally acknowledged that citizens must be in a position to effectively use their qualifications, competencies and skills throughout Europe. They called for the first time for the development of a common framework of qualifications (and for coherent quality assurance/accreditation mechanisms as a means to build up such a framework). They also called for “modules, courses and curricula which are “European” by their content, orientation or organisation, in particular those leading to joint degrees”. In Berlin little more was added about employability issues, but Ministers underlined the importance of improving the understanding and acceptance of the new qualifications, including through reinforced dialogue between higher education and employers, and the need for different orientations and various profiles of qualifications, in order to accommodate the diversity of needs, including labour market needs. At the more operational level they called (again) for a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications, adding that such qualifications should be described in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competencies and profile. For the first time, they specifically wondered whether and how shorter qualifications “may be linked to the first cycle of qualification”, i.e. the Bachelor level. Yet, among the various bodies involved in the follow-up work for the next two years (until the ministerial meeting in Bergen in 2005) there is still no involvement of employers or industry.

At EU level the most important development within the Lisbon Strategy is the call for a European framework of reference for qualifications encompassing vocational education and training and higher education. Hence, the need to set in place this crucial instrument is now a core part of both the Bologna agenda (as expressed by Ministers in Berlin) and the EU’s Lisbon Strategy.

As a clear illustration of its “crystalisation” function, the Bologna Declaration’s intention to promote the employability of graduates on the European labour market has been widely endorsed at national level because it has been seen as underpinning national plans aimed at

enhancing employability. Such plans have emerged in member States for different types of reasons:

- In several countries employability has been a long-standing backbone of the national higher education policy and the Bologna Declaration is naturally seen as reinforcing national efforts.
- In countries where bachelor-type qualifications have confirmed acceptance on the labour market the main emphasis seems to be not so much on employment in general (graduate unemployment tends to be low), but rather on the adjustments to specific market needs, especially in view of growing skills and labour shortages.
- In new Member States the Bologna Declaration's emphasis on employability has met other, convergent calls for reform related to the preparation for the European labour market, well before the end of the transition phase.
- In several countries the attention paid to employability and links with industry in the Bologna process has been seen as a welcome support provided to efforts aimed at curbing high graduate unemployment rates.

These various reasons explain why in most countries the acknowledgment that employability needs to be fostered seems to be a powerful source of change and reform in higher education. In the EU context, this trend has been further reinforced thanks to the strong (yet not exclusive) emphasis on growth and employment provided by the Lisbon Strategy and its impact on national agendas in education and training (mainly through the 13 European objectives set out in "Education & Training 2010").

These developments point in the same direction as the Bologna process, whose impact can be found mainly in three areas.

- The most visible aspect is that the Declaration created a broad debate about employability after a first (Bachelor-type) degree. There are still reminders that higher education is not only for professional purposes and there is still some concern in the university sector that first degrees should not be geared too narrowly to short-term needs on the labour market. But on the whole the move is clearly towards a stronger attention to employment prospects and the acquisition of core, or transversal, skills. The few qualification frameworks that have emerged at national level are strongly "outcome-based" and qualifications are mostly defined in terms of skills/competencies acquired by graduates. The debate underlined that both academic and professional Bachelor degrees need to be "relevant" (although in not exactly the same way). In several countries new legislation made relevance to the labour market a key factor for the authorisation (or "accreditation") of new programmes or made the collaboration with professional bodies compulsory in the development of new curricula. This is sometimes combined with specific efforts to promote first degree graduates on the labour market, e.g. by adjusting the statutes/laws regulating access to civil service or to regulated professions.
- The second impact of the Bologna Declaration's interest in employability is that it provided new impetus for the further development of the college/polytechnic sector and for its creation in a few more countries. In nearly all countries with a binary

system the Declaration re-opened a debate on the respective roles of various types of higher education institutions and on the profile of their degrees. This debate has been especially intense in countries where a strong college/polytechnic sector provides a relatively high proportion of graduates with qualifications geared towards access to the labour market after 2, 3 or 4 years. In these countries the need for a shift towards "employability" in the university sector is clearly not felt in the same way as in those where higher education is mostly or exclusively found at universities. This new impetus for professional higher education has also led to the creation or extension of a binary system in several countries, e.g. through the creation of professional degrees at bachelor and in some countries also at master's level.

- Finally, *the Bologna Declaration has played an important role in drawing attention to the increasingly European dimension of the issue of employability.* In most countries the widening of the European dimension in higher education qualifications is seen mainly in conjunction with the development of the EU programmes for co-operation and mobility (SOCRATES, LEONARDO). The Trends III report observed a strong link between mobility and employability. In the wake of the Prague Communiqué of Ministers of Education there also is renewed attention given to the setting up of joint, integrated or double-degree courses in several countries. A number of countries created special funding possibilities for such courses or promote the development of courses with a "European" orientation taught in English and designed for national and foreign students alike. The continuous development of European summer courses in a wide spectrum of disciplines and specialisation areas, run by a single institution or jointly by higher education networks (e.g. UNICA or ECIU), should also be noted in this regard. Within the EU context the series of directives on professional recognition are important tools for employability in Europe. They are under review and the Commission has put forward a proposal to replace them by a single Directive on professional recognition. This would have happened anyway, but at the same time it underpins the labour market objectives of the Bologna process.

III. Lessons learnt and suggestions for policy development

The above developments within the Bologna process may be interpreted as signals of fundamental changes in European higher education in its interface with the labour market dimension. This section will try to identify the main lessons learnt for future policy development.

- *Higher education is ever more integrated with economic policies as a key factor of competitiveness.* This refers both to the ability of graduates to compete successfully in the European labour market and to that of universities and national systems to compete worldwide in view of the globalisation of technologies and markets;
- *Employability is a key aspect that should be taken into account, along with others, when higher education institutions design or renovate curricula and learning methods.* This is in full agreement with the best tradition of universities, who have for centuries educated (and indeed "trained") lawyers, doctors, church executives, researchers and top civil servants and allowed them to earn a living while at the same time serving the community and acting as citizens. The main change is not with reference to the essence of the mission of universities, but only to the much greater

number and diversity of economic and social positions requiring higher education in modern, knowledge-based economies and societies. This also implies that there is no fundamental contradiction between employability and the development of the humanistic, social and citizenship aspects of higher education.

- *The relevance of higher education should be assessed with reference to the European, rather than just the national labour market. Although the Bologna process extends to the whole of Europe, this is of course particularly true with respect to EU countries, where the Bologna process and the implementation of the Lisbon goals reinforce each other, particularly with respect to aspects of higher education related to employability.*
- *Employability should be assessed with regard to all possible forms of professional occupation on the European labour market, including self-employment (i.e. employability is not limited to the possibilities of working as an employee for an employer).*
- *Employability should always be understood as **sustainable** employability rather than as a mere preparation for the immediate or short term needs of the labour market. The term was forged in France as “employabilité durable” and there is an ever clear understanding that it refers not only to high level, long or academic courses, but also to more vocational ones.*
- *All initial and lifelong learning courses should pay attention to employability, but there are various ways in which higher education qualifications can be “relevant to the labour market”, depending on their level and main orientation. The European Higher Education Area needs to be coherent but diverse in all respects, including with regard to employability.*
- *The design of a coherent European framework of qualifications serving as a common reference based on trustworthy quality assurance or accreditation mechanisms is the major challenging for the next stages of both the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy.*

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REFERENCES

ⁱ All documents on “Education & Reining 2010” are available on the Europa server: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/et_2010_en.html

ⁱⁱ This Section is largely based on material gathered for the Trends II and to a lesser extent on the Trends III Report (both documents are available from the Bergen website: www.bologna-bergen2005.no).

ⁱⁱⁱ Communication on the role of Universities in the Europe of Knowledge (February 2003) and Joint Interim Report on the implementation of “Education & Training 2010” (February 2004) . Both documents are available on the Europa server (cf. above, reference i).