

# The European Higher Education Area Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education

*Signed in Bologna, 19 June 1999*

## An EAIE Comment

### 1 Introduction

The European Association for International Education (EAIE) is an international non-governmental, non-profit professional association of individuals with a common interest in the international relations of education in Europe. Its mission includes:

- Articulation and representation of members' professional interests; and
- Response, review and recommendations on policies, programmes and systems falling within its field.

A list of previous EAIE Comments is appended to this document.

This Comment is based on a consultation with the EAIE membership and on drafts prepared by members of the Association's Executive Board and the IRM (International Relations Managers) Professional Section. It was adopted by the Executive Board as an official document of the EAIE in November 1999.

### 2 General remarks

The Bologna Declaration touches on many issues and has far-reaching implications for the 'philosophy of Europe'. The EAIE is, in all essential respects, strongly in support of the principles of the Declaration and the Sorbonne Declaration which preceded it. Since the EAIE is an organisation working in the specific field of international education, it has chosen not to comment on all aspects of the Bologna Declaration but rather to limit its response to issues in which its competence lies. The following observations focus on questions of clarity, plurality and concreteness, as well as specific recommendations contained in, or implied by, the Declaration.

It is important to note that the Declaration is neither a form of European directive nor an international agreement in the conventional sense. Rather, it is an act of common commitment by national governments to the principle of 'Europeanisation' of higher education through the increased cooperation of institutions. This, in the opinion of the

EAIE, adds an important 'pillar' to those already in place for educational development at European level, as well as offering a supple policy environment for pursuing issues of institutional autonomy. The limitations of such an instrument, however, need also to be recognised.

The preamble to the joint declaration espouses many virtues. What is crucial is the recognition of the need for the wider Europe to ensure the continued investment necessary in order to favour the development, through education, of the individual person as citizen. This attention to the person will bring competitive advantages from economic and business perspectives. Of equal importance, however, will be its effects in sustaining the contributions to culture, science, the arts and the body of human knowledge which Europe has historically contributed to the world. A Europe of Knowledge is a requirement that must be met for all the reasons outlined in the declaration.

The EAIE finds it easy to support the defining principles laid out in the Declaration, which it interprets as follows:

- Education and educational cooperation are essential conditions for the development of democratic societies;
- An approach based on the independence and autonomy of universities and plurality of structures is an essential precondition for flexible adaptation to changing educational and social needs;
- At the same time, a common framework is needed allowing for comparability among different systems of higher education.

### **3 Limitations of the Declaration**

A Declaration such as this one can only be a statement of intent. Achieving the agreed aims requires a coordinated programme of action by the signatories, and a concrete partnership with the universities. The Bologna Declaration specifies in broad terms the objective of reinforcing the competitiveness of European higher education, expressed in the following wording:

"The vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal that its culture has for other countries. We need to ensure that the European higher education system acquires a world-wide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions"

The EAIE wishes to point out that this objective can be reached only as a consequence (not as an aim in its own right) of excellence in education, attention to the needs of the person, research, and service. The Bologna declaration is right to stress the need for university autonomy in this context. This implies that plurality is necessary as a condition for achieving excellence in a sustainable manner, adapting methods and contents to students' and researchers' needs. It is excellence that will make a particular university or even a particular degree course attractive and therefore competitive.

#### **4 Clarity of expression**

The Declaration goes on to say:

"... the following objectives ... in order to establish the European area of higher education and to promote the European system of higher education world-wide"

Clarity of expression is needed. The use of "European area" and "European system" within the same sentence causes confusion regarding the aim, because the two are different sentiments and different things. To achieve a 'European area' requires one set of objectives; to achieve a 'European system' requires another. This difference is not one of semantics; it is a crucial distinction. The EAIE's general position is one of support for the former, and resistance to the latter.

#### **5 A European Area**

The EAIE supports the concept of a 'European area' as described in the Declaration, and would like to see its implications pursued in a concrete way. The basic principle to be respected is in our view that of adaptability to changing needs on the basis of university autonomy. The implications in respect of the Declaration's objectives include the following:

**Readable and comparable degrees:** A system allowing for readability and comparability of degrees should do just that: create a common framework inside which every degree should have a concrete and understandable meaning. It should not create uniformity.

**Adoption of a two-cycle system:** The adoption of two main cycles would be a positive move to the extent that it would serve the purposes of creating a flexible framework and enhancing comparability, without homogenising the many different structures. However, a variety of bridges and entry points have to be constructed for those who wish to enter

graduate level degree programmes. In particular, the requirement that a first cycle of study must have been completed before a second cycle study can be embarked upon, is prone to create exclusions. Much-needed opportunities result from recognition of equivalence to first-cycle studies as qualifying a student for exemption from the first cycle. The broadening of access and promotion of lifelong learning require inclusiveness, not exclusiveness.

**Establishment of a system of credits:** A credit system (such as ECTS) is to be welcomed as an instrument of accumulation, recognition and transfer. The reference to acquisition of credits from 'non-higher education contexts' is particularly positive, and reinforces the principle of inclusiveness (above). However, such an instrument risks becoming a 'straitjacket' unless there is provision for it to be applied in a flexible way. Institutions should have substantive powers to decide on their methodologies of recognition, taking into account differences of institutional profile and academic infrastructure such as course prerequisites for a particular degree or qualification.

**Promotion of mobility:** The promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles and the creation of a European dimension in higher education based on free transnational cooperation between institutions is to be welcomed, as is the stepping up in gear of the various EU Programmes (SOCRATES, LEONARDO, Fifth Framework programme, *etc*). The natural curriculum development of issues broader than a single state should be encouraged (EC Law, business strategy, Human Resource Management, political institutions, *etc*) but artificial constructions for the sole purpose of a 'European label' should be avoided.

## **6 A 'European system'**

If however a single European system of higher education is the aim, then a more centralist approach would be needed. This, in the opinion of the EAIE, is not desirable nor indeed achievable. The arguments against any attempt to create a single system outweigh any advantages, both pragmatically and in principle. The EAIE wonders whether, in fact, the wording of the Declaration at this point ("... promote the European system of education world-wide ...") refers to a political/economic, rather than an educational, set of objectives. The EAIE believes that comparability, not homogeneity, should be the aim; and that the guiding principles should be those of pluralism coupled with transparency.

## **7 Pluralism**

The EAIE is in favour of a plurality of approaches in higher education. The strength of

Europe is its ability to unite, without creating uniformity. This strength should in turn be explicitly recognised as inherent to the 'European area of higher education'. Conversely, to the extent that the use of the term 'system' implies uniformity, such a 'system' would not be a European one. Just as bio-diversity is to be welcomed and sustained (*cf* the Rio accords), the 'European area' should work for an academic diversity underpinned, not shackled, by the objectives of the Declaration.

Since cultures of education may vary within one nation as much as between nations, the pluralism which is in question here cannot be reduced to a coincidence with national boundaries. It should rather be seen as the legitimate consequence of different working hypotheses regarding the nature of the person, the aims and methods of education and the forms and contents of teaching and research. True plurality may be found within, as well as between, nation States. Conversely, true commonality may exist across, as well as within, national boundaries.

## **8 Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance**

Within the 'European Area' concept, quality assurance is a necessary component of an open system based on pluralism and university autonomy. However, the methodology requires careful reflection, in order to ensure that quality assurance does not set up bureaucratic obstacles to educational pluralism, innovation and competition, so becoming an agent for standardisation and homogeneity. Systems such as those for quality assurance are frameworks to enable the achievement of excellence; they do not provide excellence. The true quality of the educational systems within the Area (and therefore the attractiveness internationally of the component parts) can only come from the academic vibrancy of institutions and their staff. Quality assurance and quality enhancement are both necessary; the former to assuage the fears of governments that money might be wasted, and the latter because the search for excellence is implied in the mission of any university. Both imply the investment in continuing staff development indicated in the Declaration.

The EAIE suggests the following broad principles as a basis for development of cooperative QA methodologies within the Area:

**Criteria:** Criteria of evaluation should be output-oriented and should measure according to the institution's own statement of its objectives, methods and standards. In order to favour pluralism in education, a variety of approaches must be provided for, so long as the institution clearly states what it does, by what means, and what it wishes to achieve. Such a statement should be the source of the criteria by which the institution will be evaluated.

**Who will evaluate?:** Institutions within the Area should be free to choose from a variety of evaluation bodies. Quality assurance should not be left exclusively in the hands of government agencies or a small number of authorised associations. University consortia across Europe should be free to form their own transnational evaluation bodies.

**Accreditation:** This is not mentioned in the Declaration, but the question of external accreditation of institutions and courses is increasingly raised in the context of quality assurance. In the opinion of the EAIE, external accreditation (such as has become very visible, for example, in the US business school sector) provides a very limited framework for quality evaluation as well as creating financial and bureaucratic burdens for institutions. It should not therefore come to be relied on as a quality instrument within the European Area.

A variety of systems can be developed for quality assurance, but ultimately the best measures of quality are those of academic outputs and student response. With regard to European cooperation, the governing principle must always be that of transparency in respect of the criteria, benchmarks and actors involved in both evaluation and QA.

## **9 Conclusions**

The EAIE strongly supports the strengthening of a European Area of Higher Education through the creation of a flexible framework based on two cycles as an external structural frame, inside which the institutions can be encouraged to develop their programmes in a creative manner. Employability will be favoured through the creation of a transparent yet flexibly adaptable system of different degree types. The introduction of ECTS in all the institutions of the Area should be promoted. Fundamental obstacles to mobility should be removed. For this purpose, portability of loans and grants should be provided for. In the area of professional education in particular, legal and administrative obstacles to the international mobility of students and trainees should be addressed and overcome.

The EAIE wishes to stress that the effect of establishing a European Area should be to create new possibilities for fertile cooperative action by institutions and individual actors across, as well as within, the boundaries of national systems. Such an opening of doors ('subsidiarity' without 're-nationalisation') will lead to results which are inherently unpredictable. This is as it should be; all creative innovation carries risk. These are, however, the risks that European education needs to take in order to move forward.

In the year in which its own Annual Conference addresses issues of cross-border

cooperation in higher education, the EAIE finds it an opportune moment to offer these observations.

## **10 Acknowledgments**

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