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The College/Polytechnic Sector in the Post-Bologna Scenarios

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION OF JUNE 1999

Towards a (coherent, compatible, competitive) European higher education area

In the wake of the Sorbonne Declaration signed in May 1998 by a more limited number of countries, the Bologna Declaration on the creation of a European space for higher education is a pledge taken by 29 countries to reform the structures of their own higher education system in such a way that overall convergence emerges from the process at the European level.

The Declaration is not just a political statement; rather, it sets out an action programme for which it defines the key aspects:

- a clearly defined common goal: the creation of a coherent European higher education space, as a means to foster :
 - employability and mobility in Europe,
 - the international competitiveness and the attractiveness of European higher education in the world;
- a realistic deadline: the European higher education space should be completed within the next decade;
- a set of specified objectives:
 - the design of a common framework of reference of easily readable and comparable degrees;
 - the articulation of studies into undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with first degrees relevant to the labour market and graduate studies requiring the prior completion of a first degree;
 - the generalisation of ECTS-compatible credit systems;
 - a European dimension in quality assurance;
 - the elimination of remaining obstacles to the mobility of students, teachers and graduates;
- an organised follow-up and implementation structure and process, based mainly on intergovernmental cooperation conducted in collaboration with higher education institutions and associations; the declaration also states that ministers would meet again in Prague in 2001 to review progress and plan for the next stages.

No differentiation between sub-sectors of higher education

The central piece in the Bologna Declaration is the "common framework of reference for qualifications" which should emerge from the convergence process. It is particularly important to point out some of its most basic characteristics:

- the framework will serve as a common "reference"; it is not in any way an instrument for the uniformisation of curricula, institutions or diplomas;
- it is for "qualifications", not for "degrees": the Declaration has a strong inclination towards employment and the labour market dimension rather than towards the more "academic" aspects;

- the framework is for all qualifications; there is not a single word in the Declaration from which one could conclude that it refers only to a part of higher education; the European framework for qualifications encompasses the all higher education qualifications, including universities, colleges/polytechnics and lifelong learning;
- it is for "qualifications", not for "institutions": what matters is not where a qualification was acquired, but what skills and competencies it guarantees.

This being said, it should be equally clear that the Declaration is underpinned by a plea for transparency; hence, attempts to hide the differences in the orientation, level and content of qualifications would not be in line with the objectives of the Bologna Declaration. The future European framework is for all types of qualifications, but it does not in any way presume that they are all the same type. Its essence is to deal in all clarity with diversity, not to hide or reduce differences.

A new era in European higher education

Over the next ten years, governmental and institutional policies in higher education will need to take account of a series of broad changes which contribute to shaping a new era in European higher education. Many of these changes are likely to open new windows of opportunities for institutions in the college/polytechnic sector.

- One of these changes is the implementation of the Bologna Declaration itself. It should lead to growing convergence in the structure of systems and qualifications, in particular through the growing recognition in countries and institutions in Europe that their biggest challenges are very similar and that common issues call for common action. Within the framework of the Bologna process, higher education institutions of all types have a unique opportunity to influence the key aspects of the emerging European higher education area: a major characteristic of the Sorbonne/Bologna process is that it is based on an organised dialogue between governments and the higher education sector at the European level; in 2001, higher education institutions will first between themselves try to agree a common position (in Salamanca in March) before their representatives meet with Ministers in Prague in May.
- Another major change in the Bologna decade will be the increased competition at all levels, in particular for students; at the national level, this means that universities will have to make more efforts to attract applicants and graduates from the college/polytechnic sector, and vice-versa; internationally, the competition will grow not only between institutions, but also between the various national systems, as students have a more and more effective choice between national and foreign education.
- This also means that transnational education (i.e. education delivered in a given country under the control of a foreign institution, either through distance education, internet, a branch campus or a franchising agreement) is likely to continue to grow; this is of particular relevance for colleges/polytechnics, since the areas where transnational education is strongest are also those in which the colleges/polytechnics operate most intensively (e.g. information and communication technologies, business and management); this means that colleges/polytechnics are more exposed than traditional universities, but also that there may be more opportunities for those who are able to attract students from abroad.
- The growing role of employment aspects in the shaping of education policies has already been mentioned; there is a marked move in this direction, as could be seen very clearly at the recent European Summit in Lisbon; the success of the college/polytechnic sector in this area could well earn it continued or increased support from government and the private sector. The clear interest of the Bologna Declaration for the employability of graduates on the European labour market could thus be seen by colleges/polytechnics as a sign of recognition and an encouragement to build on their traditional strengths.
- Finally, the decade is likely to see a strong push for accreditation; the certification of quality by independent bodies, instead of the State, is gaining acceptance in Europe; the number of countries who have an accreditation agency is growing fast; in many, a major issue in the debate is whether the same agency should cover the whole of higher education, or whether there should be different agencies for the different sub-sectors of higher education.

Success scenarios for Polytechnics/Colleges in the post-bologna era

Overall, it seems that the Bologna Declaration and the ensuing convergence process offers more opportunities than threats for the college/polytechnic sector. There are however, in my view, two main conditions that need to be met : the college/polytechnic sector itself needs to get more organised and better recognised.

Getting organised

In my opinion the complete success of the college/polytechnic sector in the European higher education area will be conditional on their addressing the following organisational issues.

- A basic requirement is that institutions need to reach a critical size and offer a minimal range of courses and services. From this perspective, the merger process which has taken place in many countries in Europe, but is still neither finished nor generalised, plays a crucial role.
- Another difficulty that must be overcome (and has even become an emergency) is that the sector lacks a clear definition and a common name. There is currently no clear agreement about the type of institutions belonging to the sector in each country and in Europe as a whole; it is not even clear whether the college/polytechnic sector is a single one covering a wide variety of institutions, or whether it should itself be subdivided according to such criteria as purpose, duration of studies, type of degrees offered, size, etc. It also seems to me obvious that the sector needs to find a name by which it can be identified and addressed; the still commonly-used reference to the "non-university" sector is both misleading and negative; the term "colleges/polytechnics" is not easy to use and is often misunderstood. Some inventive step needs to be taken and a single name adopted to designate comparable institutions (at least in the English language) in the European and worldwide context. Polytechnics/colleges need and want a direct voice in the debate about the future structure of the European higher education area; this voice can best be carried by an organisation, or a common platform of organisations, representing them all. I appreciate this is easier to say than to achieve, but would certainly encourage EURASHE to explore possibilities in this direction.
- A third important success factor is that colleges/polytechnics need to offer curricula which are compatible with the emerging European framework of qualifications. This means in particular that efforts should go in the following directions: the degree structure should distinguish the sub-degree, first degree and postgraduate levels; all courses should be credit-rated; appropriate recognition should be given to prior learning, including independent or work-based learning; curricula should pay due attention to employment possibilities in the European labour market (language learning, transversal skills, experience in another European country, etc).
- All above characteristics are part of the efforts towards quality assurance and quality certification ("accreditation") which receive growing attention in the preparation for the next phases of the convergence process towards the European higher education area. It seems to me clear that the whole system is moving towards more quality assurance and external accreditation, and the college/polytechnic sector needs to make certain that it either participates in comprehensive quality/accreditation schemes or develops its own.

Getting recognised

Over and above the need to get organised for the European higher education area, colleges/polytechnics may have to tackle a number of other important issues if they want their role and weight to be fully recognised.

- A key imperative is the need to enhance the visibility of a sector as a group; as I said before, this is however only going to be possible once the sector solves its own, internal organisational problems.
- Another absolute priority of colleges/polytechnics should in my view be to ascertain their right to compete without a handicap in the international arena. In view of their high standards in every respect, the colleges/polytechnics of many countries in Europe have an enormous potential in the worldwide higher education markets, but they must compete in them with a structural handicap because they are not allowed to use the word "university" in their name, whereas their competitors from other world regions are not subject to the same limitation. I have always thought that countries where this applies were penalising themselves and their own higher education. But it is

no better if one looks at the issue from the European perspective; far from penalising them, European countries should unleash the competitive potential of their high-quality college/polytechnic sector. The solution adopted in Germany or the Netherlands, where *Fachhochschulen* and *Hogescholen* can present themselves internationally as "universities of applied sciences" is a step in the right direction; colleges/polytechnics in other countries which are of comparable level (but only these) should in my opinion make it a strategic objective to gain the same right; in the medium-term, this would allow the setting of European-wide standards for "universities of applied science" and the development of the coherent, powerful sector in European higher education with tremendous "export" potential. In order to be understood correctly, I would like to emphasise that I am not in any way advocating the so-called "academic drift" in the sector; quite the contrary: my opinion is that colleges/polytechnics have reasons to be proud of their difference, and should build on it, also internationally; my only point is that in many regions in the world, they can only succeed if their name conveys an appropriate message about their standards.

- For the purpose of recognition, another important aspect is related to the possibility (for those students and graduates of colleges/polytechnics who wish to do so) to transfer to the university sector, either immediately or after a period in professional life. There is a need to eliminate structural obstacles to this type of mobility in several European countries. The introduction of credits and of a compatible degree structure throughout European higher education may help to achieve this. But there are two other factors which may bring about positive change in this area more drastically and more rapidly. First, adverse demographic trends at universities make it more important for many to attract graduates from the college/polytechnic sector. Secondly, access restrictions in one country may easily be avoided at the European level, and countries or universities imposing them are now finding out that their main effect is to entice students to get elsewhere what they cannot get at home.
- This is not unrelated to another point which is currently high on the agenda of many colleges/polytechnics; the right to award Master degrees. There also, restrictive regulations exist in many countries but tend to penalise the national higher education sector as a whole. Colleges/polytechnics not allowed to offer Master courses according to national legislation have for years sought and found a European escape, mostly in the form of an agreement with a foreign (mostly British) university interested in admitting their graduates into one of their Master's programmes. There are clear signals that governments are now seeing the unwanted effects of national restrictions of this kind, and it seems to me predictable that colleges/polytechnics will soon officially be in a position to offer Master degrees in a majority of countries in Europe. A move in this direction would also facilitate the development of a new type of mobility at European level, both between colleges/polytechnics and with universities: in a diversified, but compatible European higher education area, students who have completed a first degree are much more likely than hitherto to choose a different institution, possibly in a different country, for further studies ("vertical mobility"); ideally, they should be in a position to choose at that stage from the whole diversified spectrum of postgraduate courses available all over Europe and pick the one that best suits their objectives and needs.
- Finally, the growing emphasis on professional recognition (as opposed to mere academic recognition) and the attempts in progress to design mechanisms for the Europe-wide recognition of accredited qualifications open new perspectives which should not be ignored by colleges/polytechnics. Preparing now for quality evaluation and for professional, regional and/or sectorial accreditation is likely to prove a particularly useful investment into the European higher education area in the near future.