

Associations in Flemish Higher Education

If stagnation means decline, then we can fully conclude that Higher Education in Flanders has made (a lot of) progression over the past decade. During the past ten years, fundamental changes have taken place in the organization of both Universities and 'Hogescholen'. And, as yet, there are no signs of stagnation or immobility.

1. Case History.

As in other domains in our society and under increasing international pressure, also in Flemish (Higher) Education, the idea is gaining importance that for reasons of quality, we should use the financial and human means available more efficiently. In daily life, this boils down to a closer cooperation between all institutes of Higher Education, 'Hogescholen' and Universities. Developing a knowledge-based society obviously presupposes combined forces: the creation of larger entities that open up new horizons, is but one of the consequences.

After 'University Decree'¹ of 1991, the Flemish Parliament voted the 'Hogescholen Decree'² in 1994. This decree or law, in all respects, caused a revolutionary reform and a new design of the formerly shattered and less well organized landscape of the 'Hogescholen':

- of the then more than 160 'Hogescholen', today 24 (merged) institutes remain,
- Higher Education was split up in programs of one cycle (the three-year graduates) and of two cycles (education on an 'academic level' taking four to five years),
- the 'Hogescholen' received larger financial responsibility through the introduction of closed allocated funds (so called lump sum financing),
- the institutes themselves are expected to take initiatives concerning continued education, individual programs and postgraduate training,
- the 'Hogescholen' must commit themselves to projects of 'social service' and applied scientific research,
- the institutes are responsible for the organization of the internal and external quality control and assurance (the so-called 'visitations'),
- the provision of the possibility to set up a cooperation treaty between two or more 'Hogescholen' or between a 'Hogeschool' and a University. These cooperation treaties can refer to nearly all areas of activity of 'Hogescholen' and Universities.

The Bologna Declaration aims at the creation of 'one European Higher Education Area'. The 'cooperation' between 'Hogescholen' and Universities plays an important role in the implementation of the Bologna Declaration and

¹ This is a law or decree regulating the structure of the Universities.

² This is a law or decree regulating the structure of the 'Hogescholen'.

in the impending reforms in Flemish Higher Education – being the creation of one (?) area of Flemish Higher Education.

The possibilities for cooperation are today already quite extensive and nothing – at first sight - appears to be obstructing a far-reaching cooperation between ‘Hogescholen’ among themselves and between ‘Hogescholen’ and Universities.

And this cooperation does in fact exist: in some places in an intense way between ‘Hogescholen’ or between ‘Hogescholen and Universities; in other places – and quite possibly in most places – it is still limited or non-existent.

Several explanations are possible for the limited cooperation until today:

- (1) the restructuring of Higher Education has required all attention over the past few years. Within the merged institutes, the internal organization and the ‘make sure to work and live together’ of different small ‘Hogescholen’ were not always easily managed,
- (2) the lack of tradition and stimuli, the multitude and colorfulness of the institutes, the influence of the ‘nets’ and the socio-political blocks,... and the somewhat condescending attitude of the Universities caused – especially in the past few years – a reticence,
- (3) the competitive and especially the funding context (i.c. the closed and too limited allocated funds) in which the institutes are functioning today, create extra difficulties for a cooperation between the ‘Hogescholen’ among themselves and also with the Universities,
- (4) the possibilities theoretically offered by the Decrees’, are crippled by the insufficient lenience of the rules (cf. personnel, research).

These elements had to be taken into account at the moment of restructuring and of passing the new ‘Decree on restructuring the organization of Higher Education in Flanders’.

2. Specific Context of Flemish ‘Hogescholen’.

Before going into more detail in the (new) ‘Structural Decree’³ – focusing on the implementation of the Bachelors and Masters, the accreditation of the programs and the cooperation between the ‘Hogescholen’ and the Universities via the so-called associations -, it is paramount or important for the ‘Hogescholen’ to explain the specific context and the preconditions.

Some of these conditions and demands were already postulated many years ago, being part of the platform of demands of the ‘Hogescholen’, even before the ‘Decree on restructuring Higher Education in Flanders’ came into existence. Until today, these demands have lost nothing of their topicality and remain important for the ‘Hogescholen’. As far as the ‘Hogescholen’ are concerned, the discussion about the ‘Structural Decree’ and the reform of Higher Education has, after all, also a very important emancipatory significance.

³ This is a law regulating the structure of Universities and ‘Hogescholen’.

Already in 1999, the VLHORA asked the Government for an up-to-date, coherent vision on the organization of Higher Education and next to that, a correct funding of the 'Hogescholen'.

To the authorities suggestions were made which, among other things, took into account or paid attention to the following (3):

2.1 The Adaptation of the Obsolete Structure of Higher Education in Flanders.

Flemish Higher Education had 155,376 students (as far as initial or basic training is concerned) during the academic year 2000-2001:

- 'Hogescholen': 99,258 students (63.9 %) of whom 72,806 one-cycle students and 26,452 two-cycle students
- Universities: 56,118 students (36.1 %)

The structure of Higher Education in Flanders can (or could) – certainly from an international viewpoint – rather be classified as being untransparent for reasons such as:

- (1) the so-called binary structure – with 'Hogescholen' and Universities – is in fact an unclear ternary structure with programs of one cycle, two cycles and University Education
- (2) the distinction between programs or trainings of an academic level ('2C-Hogescholen') and the academic programs (Universities) is artificial and certainly for foreigners or outsiders, difficult to grasp.
- (3) the distinction between programs at 'Hogescholen' and Universities on the basis profession-orientedness is hardly tenable. All types of education presuppose a scientific basis (with an ensuing so-called academic drift from the 'Hogescholen'). Most of the programs on University level give access to socially relevant professions (which leads to the so-called vocational impetus at the Universities).
- (4) apart from that, in Flanders they generally assume or assumed that the fundamentally scientific research was best reserved for the Universities. Project-based scientific research is linked up with the core task or mission of the 'Hogescholen'. In actual practice, all of this, rather caused confusion than clarity. Cooperation between the two would be necessary on the basis of, among other things, complementarity
- (5) At the same time, this seriously fragmented structure and organization rather lead to territorial behavior and diversification than to the optimal organization of Higher Education in Flanders.

2.2 Adjustment of the Maladjusted Funding of 'Hogescholen'.

As stated before, the 'Hogescholen' provide approximately 100,000 young people with education. This figure has risen with about 10 % in comparison with the moment of implementation of the 'Decree of the Hogescholen' in the mid-nineties.

With regard to funding, we record a mere increase of only 2.4 % since the implementation of the 'Decree of the Hogescholen' in the year 1995:

- 1995: 19.20 billion BEF (€0.48 billion)
- 2000: 19.66 billion BEF (€0.49 billion)

The Government did not make available any additional resources for any of the new tasks and costs. Nor have there been made efforts to compensate for the substantial increase in the number of students. In 2000, a student at a 'Hogeschool' cost the Flemish community – with 233,000 BEF (€5,776) – less than a student in secondary education and about 200,000 BEF (€4,958) less than a student at University (438,000 BEF/€10,858).

Apart from the requirement of a 'modern' vision on the organization of Higher Education, there was also the demand for a financial adjustment in favor for the 'Hogescholen'.

2.3 The Declaration of Bologna.

As soon as the so-called Sorbonne Declaration was signed and publicized, the 'Hogescholen' insisted on the integration of its principles in legislation and in the organization of Flemish Higher Education. Neither the Government, nor the Universities were keen on this.

The fact that Flanders, together with more than 30 other European countries made a commitment in Bologna (1999) and in Prague (2001) to implement the Bologna Declaration, resulted in the so necessary reform of Flemish Higher Education.

Next to the global objective of developing a 'European Higher Education Area' by the year 2010, the subscribers – so also the Flemish ones – are expected to take measures of policy concerning about six actual aims. The 'Structural Decree' is a first step in the realization of some of the objectives.

2.4 Conclusion.

In conclusion and seen from the point of view of the 'Hogescholen', we can indicate three main areas of interest for the new Decree:

- (1) a modern organization of education with attention for flexible methods of learning and education, life-long learning, open- and distance learning, educational innovation, scientific research, ICT,...
- (2) a correct funding of Higher Education (and especially 'Hogescholen')

- (3) Flemish Higher Education going along with important international evolutions

The realization of every of the above-mentioned points of interest is not easily or feasible in a short time. Yet, this entire operation that is being launched at this very moment, may and must be much more than some embellishment and restoration of a façade, without changing radically the entire and some time archaic schoolbuilding.

Therefore, the 'Hogeschole' consider the 'Structural Decree' to be a first step towards a modern and up-to-date Higher Education organization.

3. The 'Decree on restructuring of Flemish Higher Education'.

The 'Structural Decree' constitutes two important parts: a first one tackles the structure of Higher Education, a second one, the funding of 'Hogeschole' and Universities.

We do not aim at going through this 'decree' in full detail, but rather focusing on the most important points of interest, changes and 'innovations' for Higher Education in Flanders.

3.1 A New Structure and Organization of Higher Education.

3.1.1 Two Types of Institutes.

With the 'Structural Decree', in Flanders, we will witness tomorrow a new and clearly internationally colored existence of two types of institutes of Higher Education: next to the 'classic' Universities and 'Hogeschole', room will be made for so-called "Registered Institutes of Higher Education".

This acknowledges the international phenomenon that pressure is being put on the traditional suppliers of education and also that the supply of education is increasingly being controlled or influenced by international market mechanisms.

One of the conditions for an institute to become registered, is the accreditation of the programs. In an increasingly competitive (international) context, it is important for the student, for the labour market, and for the 'classic' institutes of education, that clear demands of quality and quality control are presupposed.

3.1.2 Introducing BAMA.

As elsewhere in Europe, also in Flanders, the main topic in the reform of Higher Education is the introduction of Bachelors and Masters.

Concerning the structure of Higher Education, we will evolve from a ternary structure (programs of one cycle, two cycles and of University level) to a binary structure, introducing Bachelors and Masters. All Bachelor programs will include 180 credits, all Master programs 60 credits or more.

We should not forget that also Higher Art Education (music, plastic arts, theatre, film...) – a type of education, which today already is represented in our ‘Hogescholen’ – is fully involved in this reform operation.

We would be rushing to a conclusion if we stated that, with this reform, the binarity would be situated in the distinction between Bachelors and Masters. As yet, this distinction will mainly be noticeable in the difference between the Bachelor programs of the so-called Higher Professional Education (Professional Bachelor) and the Bachelor-Master programs in academic education of ‘Hogescholen’ and Universities. It is important to mention that all two-cycle programs of the ‘Hogescholen’ should and will, especially in an international context, become fully-fledged academic programs.

Questions, points of discussion and of adjustment continue to exist. For instance, about the orientation towards the labour market of the academic Bachelor, about the phenomenon of a academic Bachelor that only prepares to an academic Master, about the fact that despite heavy demands being made on a Master, it must be realized – a Master test of 20 credits included – in an academic program of usually and only 60 credits. Linked up with this is the debate about the prolonging of the duration of study; from a social, democratic and financial viewpoint extremely complex and difficult to resolve.

The impossibility of the Professional Bachelor to be self-sufficient in a so-called Professional Master (thus different from e.g. the Netherlands, Ireland, Spain, all being members of the Joint Quality Initiative) remains a delicate topic. The Decree does not explicitly foresee this possibility and for solutions, which somehow meet this necessity, the initiative needs to be taken via association by the ‘academic programs’. This may be slightly patronizing for some programs or ‘Hogescholen’.

Starting from the academic year 2004-2005, the ‘Hogescholen’ and the Universities have the possibility to introduce Bachelor programs (year by year); from the academic year 2007-2008, Master programs can be introduced. As a transition measure the degrees of Bachelor and Master can be granted substituting the existing degrees of Graduate, Licentiate... from the academic year 2004-2005.

From the academic year 2010-2011 – in other words, within the deadline stated in the Bologna Declaration – ‘Hogescholen’ and Universities will exclusively offer Bachelor and Master programs.

3.1.3 Accreditation of the Programs.

The introduction of accreditation of the programs (and not yet institutions) is a novelty in Higher Education in Flanders – and at the same time it is one of the most important elements in the Bologna Declaration. Not solely quality objectives are aimed, but also transparency, the exchangeability and comparability of programs and degrees in an international context.

An Accreditation Organ, probably established through an international treaty (between Flanders and the Netherlands), will – after controlling or checking

the programs against its framework of accreditation – issue a positive or negative decision of accreditation, which will be valid for six years.

The Accreditation Organ has to determine in advance, a framework of accreditation for each program or group of programs, in relation to the generic requirements of quality and level, for the two types of Bachelors and for the Masters as specified in the ‘Structural Decree’.

These requirements of quality and level refer to aspects such as the content of education, the process of education and the outcome of education. It is remarkable – especially if one is familiar with the Flemish situation – that a long-existing state of affairs is being recognized, viz. that also academic or University Masters can aim at the ‘independent execution of a profession or a group of professions’ (while, in the past, attention was focused almost exclusively on research-orientedness).

Establishing and organizing the accreditation of programs will prove to be no picnic. A number of problems and questions still need to be resolved.

Some matters are, for instance, still unclear:

- the way the Accreditation Organ is composed and is functioning (its responsibility included)
- the timing: the calendar and the path of time are tight (only a couple of months) both for the institutes and the Accreditation Organ
- the feasibility and realism of the proposed (general) minimal demands of quality and level
- the consequences for the students, the personnel and the institutes at the moment of negative decision of accreditation
- the establishing of a framework of accreditation by the Accreditation Organ for each program (or group of programs) in Higher Education, especially when we want to do all this together with other countries (differences in educational organization and –vision)
- ...

The Accreditation Organ – together with a Commission of Acknowledgement (advisory organ of the Flemish Government) which still needs to be installed – plays also an important role in the acknowledgement of new trainings and the conversion of existing (old) degrees oriented towards Bachelor and Master. This is a methodology comparable with systems that are already being used in this context abroad. The education supply in Flanders – both for ‘Hogescholen’ and for Universities – is broad and varied today. Since the mid-nineties, however, the ‘Hogescholen’ have not been allowed to include any new trainings in their curriculum and with the ‘Structural Decree’ this situation has been prolonged until 2006-2007. Apart from the valid arguments that seem to justify this ‘freeze’, this is – taking into account the quickly changing social context and needs – a difficult matter for the ‘Hogescholen’.

3.1.4 Associations.

The new decree's section 'associations' is – partly wrongfully but somehow natural – the most 'mediatized' part in the 'Structural Decree of Higher Education'.

The associations will consist of one University and at least one 'Hogeschool' and their mission is 'to steer, to plan and to improve, through mutual cooperation (...), the quality and efficiency of the supply of Higher Education (...) and research'. And all of this paying a lot of or special attention to the embeddedness of research in the academic trainings of the 'Hogescholen'.

In the concrete, this boils down to cooperation and making agreements about, for example, the following:

- rational supply of education programs
- tuning in to one another of profiles and programs
- structuring education and training routes
- improving the possibilities for students to move to an other or to a higher level
- personnel management
- educational reform and innovation
- scientific research
- internal and external quality control (the so-called 'visitations')
- accreditation
- logistic and financial policy
- student administration
- social services
- etc.

In view of the acknowledgement of the associations by the Flemish Government, every association must present a plan clearly stating which (concrete) objectives are to be realized and in which way.

We should be aware of the fact that (as yet) the associations cannot take over any of the core tasks of the participating University or 'Hogescholen'. The organization of education, the research, ... will remain – as the financial and personnel management – within the area of responsibility of the individual institute. Next, to the associations no financial resources are made available nor are they provided for. But when we look at the long (unlimited) list of possibilities of cooperation mentioned in and made possible by the 'Structural Decree', we can see that the associations offer many chances and possibilities.

Now, many of the wishes of the 'Hogescholen' are being met, especially in comparison with the first drafts of the 'Structural Decree':

- 'Hogescholen' and Universities are equal partners in the association's management and administration

- the academic trainings and programs at the 'Hogescholen' will be of equal value to the Universities' academic trainings
- the (ex-) one-cycle trainings or professional Bachelors will become fully-fledged and they will be involved in all of the objectives of the association project

With regard to cooperation (and internationalization), we have also to indicate the possibilities and the chances which are made possible, for example joint education programs and (bi)certification with institutes of higher education in Flanders, the French-speaking part of Belgium and other European countries. Besides the opportunities this cooperation and these associations may also be a risk for the 'hogescholen'. Therefore it is a necessity that the character of the trainings and programs of 'Hogescholen' are safeguarded within the associations. The strength and complementarity of each partner and each training must be valorized at the most.

3.1.5 Regulation of Languages.

The regulation of languages proposed in the 'Structural Decree' is certainly also important for 'Higher Education' in Flanders in an international context. It offers, more than is possible today, chances to Higher Education in Flanders. Dutch, as a rule, stays the language in education, but – and this is important with a view to appealing to foreign students and professors – 'deviations' are allowed for. A Flemish student will always have the possibility to follow the entire curriculum and to take the exams in Dutch, but parallel to it, institutes can offer trainings in foreign languages. However, funding remains a tricky matter...

3.2 Funding of 'Hogescholen'.

As indicated before and besides the demand for some fundamental changes in the structure and the organization of Flemish Higher Education the 'Hogescholen' have, for many years already, asked for a financial equalization.

Today, we can already state that (absolutely) not all of the requirements are met via the 'Structural Decree'.

The 'Structural Decree' provides for three new channels of funding, specifically directed at the 'Hogescholen':

- 'supplementary means' are allocated to the 'Hogescholen' for, on the one hand, the conversion to the BAMA structure and on the other, educational innovation and –flexibility (from 2003 to 2006: € 18.691 million).
- funds are made available for the strengthening of the research component of the (ex-)two-cycle or academic trainings of the 'Hogescholen', being part of an association (from 2002 to 2006: €37.550 million).
- extra resources are provided for scientific project research, obligatorily carried out by the Higher Professional Education (from 2003 to 2006: € 26.5 million).

Aggregation of these three flows of funds shows us that the 'Hogescholen' will have € 82.841 million of extra means at their disposal, up until the year 2006. Nevertheless, we must put this considerable financial effort somewhat into perspective: a large part of these resources (77.3 %) is earmarked for the research component of the mission of the 'Hogescholen', is (partly) needed in the conversion of structure and curricula to the BAMA and can, or will, consequently only give an answer in very a limited way to the structural underfunding of Education of the 'Hogescholen'.

Starting from 2006, the 'Hogescholen' and Universities have the prospect of a new funding mechanism.

4 Some Concluding Remarks.

Apart from the previous comments and criticism on the 'Structural Decree', we must admit that it is an important step in the right direction. Still, in this 'Law' or in the next legislative initiatives, more adjustments must be made or attention must be paid to:

4.1 Structural Underfunding of the 'Hogescholen'.

High-quality education presupposes, next to enthusiastic and competent staff members, a sufficient amount of money for its organization and for social services, ... The 'Structural Decree' does not give a response to the structural underfunding of the Flemish 'Hogescholen'. Fast measures are necessary in this matter.

4.2 Bologna Declaration.

Some of the important objectives of the Bologna Declaration are entirely or partly realized through the 'Structural Decree' (like easily comparable or readable degrees, the introduction Bachelor/Master structure, ...).

The implementation of three of the six concrete objectives of the Bologna Declaration has not yet been initiated. For example, the introduction of the credit-system (an absolute necessity for a flexible educational organization and life-long learning, as well as for the students' and professors' mobility, asked for in the Bologna Declaration), the promotion of the European dimension in Higher Education, ... are, as yet, completely absent in the new Decree. They constitute important obstacles or serious shortcomings with an eye to a 'modern' and international oriented educational organization.

4.3 Improving Entering, Preparing for Higher Levels of HE, and Leaving Higher Education.

Today, young people from a socio-economically weaker background still insufficiently participate in Higher Education. They are often badly advised on their choice of study and are not always well coached if they want to prepare for moving on from higher professional to academic education. On top of that, all sorts of rules often, unnecessarily hamper them.

With regard to the latter, the possibility for the Bachelors in Higher Professional Education to follow a Master's training (following on a Bachelor training) - provided that they complete a transition course of 45 to 90 credits and with the possibility to have 'the competences acquired elsewhere' valorized - is a (small) step forward..

4.4 A Real Conclusion.

Our sometimes critical considerations do not want the enthusiasm towards the 'Structural Decree' and the 'Association Project' to disappear. Cooperation – based on equality, starting from and with respect for the mission of every participating institute – is the only choice for (Flemish) Higher Education and for its students in today's competitive international context.

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