

BEYOND BOLOGNA, SALAMANCA AND PRAGUE :

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE COLLEGE/POLYTECHNIC SECTOR

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Main changes and trends in the college/polytechnic sector since Bologna

This first section is based on the main conclusions of the “Trends II” report (www.oph.fi/publications/trends2) surveying changes and reports in the whole of higher education from Bologna till Prague.

* A first observation is that within the Europe-wide debate about higher education structures triggered by the Bologna Declaration, a particularly intensively discussed aspect has been the relationship between various types of higher education institutions, i.e. the respective roles of universities and colleges/polytechnics and the profile of their degrees. The discussion focussed largely on the traditional line of divide between more “academic” and more “professional” or “applied” studies, but it also took on new dimensions, in particular with respect to the Declaration’s requirement that first (i.e. Bachelor-type) degrees should be “relevant to the labour market”. This debate has been widespread in all countries with a binary system, especially in those where a strong college/polytechnic sector provides a relatively high number 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. Yet, the main lasting outcome of the debate may well be the emergence of a basis for various types and profiles of Bachelor degrees featuring different blends between academic, vocational or professional and technical components.

In line with the above observations, one of the most conspicuous impacts of the Bologna Declaration has been to provide new impetus for the further development or the creation of the college/polytechnic sector, e.g. in Finland, Malta, Estonia, Slovakia, and Italy. Italy has recently introduced in some regions a new sector for advanced professional education and training (FSI) with a view to creating an alternative to university education. The current introduction of Foundation Degrees at British universities, although not in direct response to the Bologna Declaration, also points in the direction of the diversification of higher education as a means towards broader access and easier employability. The creation of the *licence professionnelle* at French universities and of professional Bachelors in several countries are on the contrary largely a response to the Bologna Declaration. It should however be pointed out that the extension or creation of college/polytechnic studies happened without any visible coordination, i.e. there was no specific effort to introduce more coherence from the beginning in newly created/expanded curricula and institutions.

* In response to the Bologna Declaration there has nonetheless been a move towards the introduction of Bachelors (and in some cases also Master) degrees with a more or less marked "professional" profile instead of the traditional, *sui generis* college/polytechnic degrees. Professional Bachelors have been created since 1999 in Denmark, Malta, Lithuania, Slovakia, France, Slovenia and Latvia and the MjØs report proposed to establish a common degree system for professional and academic studies in Norway. Several countries recently moved in the direction of identical or symmetric degree structures in the two sectors of their binary system. In Portugal the law of 1997 introduced the same degrees at colleges and universities. In Germany, the new Bachelor/Master degrees introduced as of 1998 are the same, irrespective of the institution which awards them (university or *Fachhochschule*), and they are subject to the same accreditation procedures.

* Yet, the pressure for Master degrees at colleges/polytechnics has led to limited change until now. The possibility for colleges/polytechnics to award Master degrees has been in many countries the subject of a very intense debate dominated by two questions: the respective role of the two types of institutions (in several countries universities have opposed non-university Masters) and the development of franchised postgraduate courses in co-operation with foreign universities where polytechnics do

not have the possibility to offer such courses themselves. The outcomes of the debate until now have been mixed. Denmark has clearly excluded the possibility of Master degrees outside universities. In Austria, *Fachhochschulen* may award *Magister* and engineering diplomas that are specific to them and are not part of the Bachelor/Master scheme. In Finland, polytechnics (AMK) have won a limited right to offer from 2002 postgraduate courses requiring from 1 to 1.5 years of study but leading to a *sui generis* diploma rather than to a Master degree. In the Netherlands *hogescholen* will be able to offer from 2002 Master courses recognised by law provided they can fund them from non-governmental sources. Liechtenstein's *Fachhochschule* will soon offer a new Master programme leading to a British degree. In Germany, even though courses created in accordance with the new Bachelor/Master structure are subject to a single set of criteria, lead to the same degrees and are under the purview of the same accreditation agencies, there are examples of courses offered in co-operation between *Fachhochschulen* and universities, but there are still not many Master degrees outside universities. In Poland, the Czech Republic or Portugal, where the possibility for colleges/polytechnics to offer Master degrees has existed for some years, it has not become common practice yet.

* The Bologna Declaration has clearly stimulated a new debate on "bridges" between the sub-systems of binary higher education systems and in some cases new possibilities have been introduced. The main aim of these changes seems to be - in perfect harmony with the lifelong learning objective - to avoid dead ends for students who did not make the right choice immediately and for those who change their plans. Agreements between colleges and universities setting out the transfer possibilities have been encouraged in the Netherlands and in both higher education systems of Belgium. Belgium's French Community adopted in 1999 new legislation aimed at unifying the transfer possibilities, some becoming guaranteed and others subject to clearly defined conditions. In the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, Estonia, Slovenia and Bulgaria, the possibilities for college graduates to continue their studies towards a Master degree at a university have been expanding, either according to new rules or simply by changed practice. France's new professional *licence* is being developed mainly for graduates of two-year professional courses such as BTS and IUT. In all countries where college-type higher education has been introduced recently, "bridges" towards university studies were included in the new legislation, e.g. in the UK ("foundation degrees" can be converted into Bachelors after no more than 4 terms of further studies), Malta, Italy or Lithuania. In Hungary there are undergraduate "colleges" offering "professional" education up to the

Bachelor level both within universities and in external colleges of professional studies, while universities continue to run academic degrees as a separate one-tier track leading straight to the Master level; even though the "bridges" leading from a college Bachelor to a university Master degree may be somewhat expanded in order to make the whole system more flexible, the system is still far from "integrating" the two sectors. In other cases there seems to be a significant gap between the possibilities existing in the legislation and the actual practice, as reported by e.g. the Czech Republic, Finland and in particular Greece, where transfers remain very uncommon.

In view of the debate within the framework of the Bologna process of convergence, it seems however important to underline two important aspects:

- bridges may be in both directions, not only from colleges/polytechnics towards universities, but also in the opposite direction, e.g. as a transition towards employment in certain cases;

- the transfer of credits acquired in a different type of institution or a different learning environment should remain the decision of the degree-awarding institution – unless it entered an agreement or a contract making the transfer automatic; a policy trying to force universities to accept all imported credits without discrimination would harm both sectors of binary systems; the real important point is that universities should adopt and disclose their policy concerning credit transfer, in order to provide transparency and avoid arbitrary decisions. Specific agreements between a university and a college/polytechnic setting out the real possibilities (as e.g. in Belgium) point in this direction.

* In the crucial areas of quality assurance and accreditation there are both examples of integrated and of separate mechanisms and agencies for the university and the college/polytechnic sector. Austria has two separate accreditation agencies for *Fachhochschulen* and for private universities, but none yet for public universities. In Poland the draft new law on higher education plans to unify the hitherto split accreditation bodies for universities and polytechnics. In Germany the National Accreditation Council created in 1999 has competence for all new Bachelor/Master degrees, whether offered by a university, a *Fachhochschulen* or jointly by both. In the Netherlands an accreditation system should be in place by 2002 as a constituent part of the reform introducing Bachelor/Master degrees. It will be built on the already existing quality assurance system and will be implemented through a single agency with two awarding bodies, for professional and scientific

courses. It is interesting to point out that the dividing line does not formally depend on the type of institution undertaking the course (i.e. whether it is a university or a *hogeschool*) but on the content and orientation of the course.

* In spite of this, the introduction of Bachelors or symmetric degree structures, the multiplication of “bridges” within binary systems and the common move towards accreditation (even where it is by different bodies) are all signals of the confirmed move towards integrated systems of higher education, i.e. various types of different and complementary institutions and qualifications organised within a single, cohesive system. Austria pointed out that the Bologna Declaration had increased the awareness that higher education has become a diversified system extending beyond universities. In the Czech Republic a move in this direction may also be observed. In Norway's integrated system (*Network Norway*) the two sub-sectors usually recognise each other's study programmes on a time-for-time basis. Sweden also has universities and colleges but sees its higher education as a "unitary" system accepted by the educational community as well as by the labour market.

* Finally, it seems important to draw attention to the first international marketing efforts from the college/polytechnic sector. The growing awareness of the need to attract more non-European students has been recognised in a number of countries (e.g. Germany, Finland, Sweden; Ireland) and some also attractive in the world has in some countries also spread to colleges/polytechnics offering Bachelor/Master degrees. A number of German *Fachhochschulen* and Dutch *hogescholen* have embarked on active marketing as part of the national effort launched by their country. Another important change is that the decision to accept foreign students is becoming increasingly decentralised and left to colleges/polytechnics, e.g. in Sweden or Belgium (French Community), where universities have enjoyed this freedom previously as part of their autonomy. International developments, i.e. those related to establishing their image and attractiveness in the world, should become a distinctively higher priority of European colleges/polytechnics; they will require a joint effort of the sector to become more “readable” and to offer certified quality (i.e. accreditation).

Salamanca, Prague, Berlin : foreseeable implications for the college/polytechnic sector and for EURASHE

* The least coherent sub-sector of European higher education ?

A major observation resulting from the above analysis of reforms/changes is that while the college/polytechnic sector has seen positive developments mainly related to the new emphasis on employability and competitiveness, these developments have taken place without a horizontal coordination between the various countries and have thus not increased the overall cohesiveness of the sector in Europe. There are still basic divergences concerning the definition and the place of the sector (within higher education, or only within tertiary education) as well as its internal organisation and common features across borders. This is likely to become a growing challenge and a pressing priority as the convergent movement accelerates in the university sector. It seems useful to recall that the European higher education area will be only as coherent as its least coherent segment.

* Real efforts to include the sector in the Bologna follow-up process

The follow-up process was marked by a basic agreement of the higher education sector that all segments should be encompassed by the convergence process towards the European higher education area. EURASHE was admitted as an observer to the meetings of the follow-up group. More importantly it was possible to organise the Salamanca meeting as a “convention of European higher education institutions” rather than as an “academic day” preceding the “ministerial day” in Prague, as was suggested from various circles. A significant number of representatives from the college/polytechnic sector were present in Salamanca (either as members of their national delegation or as part of the large EURASHE delegation) and contributed to the debate.

* Low profile in the Salamanca Message and Prague Communiqué

Neither of these two key documents includes a specific reference to the college/polytechnic sector. While both documents clearly deal with the whole of the higher education sector, neither mentioned the specific situation and needs for action in the college/polytechnic sector. The Prague Communiqué mentioned several topics to be dealt with in a series of follow-up seminars aimed at paving the way until Berlin; none is in reference to college/polytechnic degrees or structures. The participation of EURASHE in the process (together with the EUA, ESIB and the Council of Europe) as an organisation that should be “consulted” was however confirmed.

* New EUA membership structure

Salamanca saw not only the publication of the Salamanca Message : it was also the place of birth of the new European University Association (EUA) as a result of the merger of CRE and the Confederation of EU

Rectors' Conferences. While in certain countries polytechnic-type of institutions were already members of, or represented in the same Rectors' Conference as universities, they had no possibility to become individual members of the former CRE. The statutes of the new EUA open possibilities for these institutions to become associate members and this may not be neutral for EURASHE. It is suggested that a reflection about the organisation's longer term constituency may be a preliminary step towards the definition of priorities for action in the post-Prague phase.

* Towards Berlin, 2003 : raising the profile of the sector ?

The organisation and methods of the follow-up process are likely to be significantly different in the phase leading from Prague to Berlin with respect to the post-Bologna stage. The role of governments may become more prominent, the European Commission may be able to contribute more freely, the "preparatory group" has become more stable (it will be chaired by Germany until Berlin instead of being subject to rotation) but the two higher education organisations involved (EUA and EURASHE) are not members of it (they will be "consulted").

In this environment, and bearing in mind that specific needs for convergence and coherence of the college/polytechnic sector, it may be advisable to raise its profile in the run-up to Berlin. Possible action may include :

- the organisation of a seminar dedicated to identifying issues, trends and priorities specific to colleges and to polytechnics (jointly or separately);
- the provision of expert advice with a European dimension to policy makers dealing with binary systems, in order to avoid additional divergence and possibly to foster convergence *ab initio*, in particular in countries where reforms are considered (e.g. on issues concerning accreditation, or in countries of the former Yugoslavia where the creation of a college/polytechnic sector is envisaged);
- a fundamental agreement within the sector itself of clear definitions of key notions (the name of the sector and its status, the nomenclature of degrees) policy lines (e.g. on credits, the Diploma Supplement, quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms).

These are issues that the Board and members of EURASHE may wish to tackle in the weeks and months ahead, possibly as ingredients of an action-oriented programme leading up to next year's annual conference in Budapest. Enhancing the cohesiveness and compatibility of the sector of colleges and polytechnics, as integral parts of the European higher

education system, is necessary not only for the future of these institutions and their students, but also for the readability, compatibility and hence competitiveness of the whole European higher education area.

Main references

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