

The Challenges of a European Higher Education Space

by

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I.

Let me first of all on behalf of the CRE – Association of European Universities – and the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences join the welcome to all of you.

II.

It was on May 25, 1998 that the Sorbonne Declaration on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne-University was signed by the ministers of France, Germany, Italy and UK. This has been without any doubt a very important signal making clear that there is a necessity of intergovernmental concerted action to create a European Higher Education Space.

The Sorbonne Declaration has provided us with an important analysis of what is to be done in the future and it has envisaged some rather considerable and remarkable steps to cope with the challenges raised by a European Higher Education Space. On the other hand: only four ministers have signed it and not too many ministers have joined them up to now. This is one of the reasons why it is so important that tomorrow a new declaration will be signed by more ministers and – this is worthwhile to be mentioned – not only from EU member states but also from non member states in central and eastern Europe as well as from Norway and Switzerland.

III.

The reason for today's Forum is that education is not only a responsibility of governments. Many European universities have signed the Magna Charta Universitatum on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of our hosting university, the University of Bologna. This magna charta confirms the autonomy and freedom of the university. Autonomy and responsibility are two sides of one coin. Therefore the 68th assembly of

the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences, meeting last week in Finland, underlined that the shaping and structuring of the future European Higher Education Space is also a, if not the most important responsibility of the universities and other institutions of higher education. As it is been accepted and emphasized in the Sorbonne Declaration and in the Bologna Declaration to be signed tomorrow higher education institutions have to play an important role in developing a concept for the European Space for Higher Education and in implementing it.

IV.

The Sorbonne Declaration reminds us of those times when students and academics could freely circulate and rapidly disseminate knowledge throughout the continent. To restore this situation is essential for a European Higher Education Space. The Confederation therefore in the last years has accompanied the decision making process concerning the new generation of education, training and youth programmes of the European Union with recommendations in order to support the Commission, the Parliament and the Council of the EU in optimizing and simplifying the mobility programmes.

V.

But we should not forget that Europe - and this is different compared with "those times" of the middle age - is no longer the self sufficient economic and cultural center of the world. On one side we are on international level again communicating in one language. But on the other side we are living in a time in which global views, actions and challenges enhanced by modern ICT are dominating and demanding every effort of institutions of higher education - though locally based - to stay or become able to compete in a world wide scenario. This competition does not only take place in research thus seeing the institutions competing world wide for professors or young researchers and resources. To be able to compete is also necessary in teaching for several reasons. One is to be attractive for students from all over the world them being the opinion leaders of tomorrow in their countries. Another is that the graduates from higher education institutions are no longer competing for a job on local or national labour markets but world wide.

VI.

Higher education in the past used to be an exclusive domain for a chosen few (5 % of an age group). After the Second World War, however, European societies have been faced with a constantly growing demand for higher education. This development was encouraged by many governments who saw it as a means to stimulate their country's industrialization. Today in most European countries, between one third and one half of each year's cohort is asking for higher education, in some countries even more ($\pm 50\%$ to HE in general, $\pm 30\%$ to universities) and this percentage will continue to grow, at least in some member states of the European Union.

VII.

The young people nowadays apply at the universities with different and inhomogenous expectations, interests and capabilities. The majority of them submits itself to the efforts

and financial burdens of studying in order to find a well paid job later outside university and research. Many of them expect from higher education institutions a broadly based education to be prepared to react in a flexible way to the changing profile of the demand of the labour market. Another part expects a preparation for a special extra scientific profession. Not few of the students have to spend part of their time jobbing in order to earn money to finance the costs of studying. Then there is an increasing demand for further and continuing education from enterprises and graduates who are already exercising a professional activity, not to forget a general demand on part of society for contributions from higher education institutions to lifelong learning.

VIII.

The way to cope with these challenges and demands is diversification by promoting variety, flexibility and the possibility to combine courses and programmes.

Diversification can happen and takes place within the individual institution as well as between institutions thus creating different types of institutions. It happens between higher education and vocational education. Examples of intra-institutional diversification are the courses leading to a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degree or diploma courses, graduate courses finishing with the Dr.-degree and continuing academic education. Examples of inter-institutional diversification, on the other hand, are the distinctions between "Université" and "Grande Ecole" in France, "Universität" and "Fachhochschule" in Germany; "Universiteit" and "Hogeschool" in the Netherlands, "University" and "College" in Central European states and the setting-up of non-university sectors of higher education in Austria, Finland and Switzerland.

The Sorbonne Declaration and the Bologna Declaration to be signed tomorrow are stimulating diversification in order to improve international recognition and the attractiveness of „our systems" by pleading for the adoption of two main cycles. Whatever may be the outcome of the discussions and development initiated by the Sorbonne Declaration on structuring studies it has to be taken into account that it will only be convincing if it is the result of a discussion and decision with regard to the contents and not of labelling or quantitative factors.

IX.

The aim of higher education is to make graduates able for a job. They should be made fit for the individual job by training in practice. The traditional university concept of combining research and teaching and thus promote and encourage a personal and a development of a solid basic disciplinary and methodological knowledge is still valid for the future. It includes nowadays and in the future the development of key qualifications as communication- and teamwork-skills and the knowledge of foreign languages. But on the other hand it is not the only concept for higher education.

X.

Higher education systems will have to develop more flexible curricula consisting of modules in order to open the uniform structure and leave to every single student to

choose her or his learning path, that means to decide whether she or he will spend full time or only part time for studying, when to graduate, at which level, and with which qualifications.

It has become obvious that the introduction of a system of credits is promoting mobility and flexibility and can shorten the duration of studies. But an open question is whether a mere accumulation of credits is sufficient for awarding a degree or a qualification.

XI.

To what extent flexible and open systems should be introduced should be up to the individual university to decide but the quality of the modules should be checked and evaluated. The reason why the cooperation between institutions of higher education nowadays is mostly bilateral and binational is the desire to have guaranteed the quality of programmes, credits and exams. This is not only because universities are rather aware of the fact that fruitful cooperation depends on the quality of the partners, that they are well advised not to damage their reputation by cooperation with non-adequate partners, but also due to the idea of consumer protection and accountability.

XII.

If the aim is to approach multilateral and multinational cooperation and recognition one has to make sure that a certain quality is met by the institutions involved. The means to achieve this is accreditation, a procedure well known in at least some of the member states of the EU.

Accreditation can have different aims. What is necessary is an accreditation system guaranteeing minimum standards of quality in favour of students, employers and society.

This does not mean that a European accreditation agency is desirable. We have to be aware of the fact that recognition of credits and exams awarded by another university or institution of higher education for academic reasons is within the autonomy of universities or their faculties. The recognition of exams under the aspect of access to a certain profession is part of the responsibility of state governments, sometimes of professional associations alone or in addition.

To promote further inter-university agreements – as it is foreseen in the Sorbonne Declaration – is one way to validate acquired knowledge and improve recognition of respective degrees. But a further possible step could also be to guarantee minimum standards of quality by a national accreditation agency and to recognize the results of national accreditation procedures in a multilateral agreement establishing a common but to a certain extent flexible frame of reference and open for joining to all universities concerned and willing.

The national accreditation systems should involve representatives of the national university community, the state and of those who will employ the university graduates. The procedure to be observed in setting standards must take care of the expertise of the individual discipline and guarantee internationally competitive quality by the contribution of experts or peers from other countries.

XIII.

In order to avoid a general structural insecurity of employment the working population must adjust to the changing needs of the labour market by frequently updating, upgrading or totally reconverting their vocational profiles. Continuing education and training appears as the only way to avoid dequalification and the risk of dismissal and unemployment. Continuing education for all members of society is a must, to avoid maladjustment, exclusion and loss of social stability. Therefore what is far more important than in the past is the answer of the institutions of higher education to the need for a life-long pursuit and renewal of knowledge.

XIV.

Knowledge and qualification are besides labour and capital key elements of the future development of society. Therefore higher education and research in the society of the 21st century will be even more important and necessary than in the 20th century. Higher education institutions as parts of a rapidly changing world will have to play an essential role to meet with these challenges by organizing and promoting research and offering flexible and diversified study programmes, they will have to educate and train young researchers and to offer and provide continuing academic education and training.

XV.

Diversity and variety on one side, cooperation and competition on the other side will determine the European Higher Education Space. This will be an enrichment if variety and diversification are going hand in hand with open access and permeability. Credits, exams and degrees must be convertible in the European higher education space in the sense of equivalent not equal.

XVI.

Many of these issues and ideas have been discussed in the last years by the assembly of the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences. National reports presented at every meeting of the assembly of the Confederation have shown that the introduction of a first degree after 3 years and a second degree after 5/6 years has been achieved or is at least discussed in some of the member countries. The credit system was unknown to most of the continental European states 10 years ago. Then it was launched by a pilot project of the Commission – European Credit Transfer System – and it is now spreading. The modularization of courses and programmes is happening. Programmes of continuing education are more and more discovered as being important and offered in the process of vertical diversification. Bi- or trilateral programmes are organized and degrees are awarded as a result of crossborder cooperation of faculties and institutions of higher education.

The problem is that we did not know to what extent all this happens and is or seems to be successful or not. Therefore to prepare future planning and action and to enable higher education institutions and their associations to take their responsibility in shaping and structuring the European higher education space it was decided by the Confederation and the CRE to raise the present state of the art. The report will be presented immediately by Dr. Guy Haug. But it should be mentioned that the project

was financially supported by the Commission and that it could only be achieved due to the cooperation of many organizations especially the Rectors' Conferences of the countries involved.

The report comprises information on and analyses current trends in higher education in the member states of the EU and the European Economic Area. Nobody including governments can any longer say that an overview of recent and present developments in Europe, of areas of divergence and convergence is not available. What is presented by two experts, Jette Kirstin, responsible for the data collection, and Dr. Guy Haug, responsible for the comparative analysis and validation of the results, is an extremely useful adviser for decision making of governments and higher education institutions and I feel privileged to express our thanks to Jette Kirstin and Guy Haug and to the coordinator of the project, the Director of the Confederation, Inge Knudsen.

