

Report on impact of current EC reforms at grass roots level

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The Bologna Declaration in 1999 initiated the widest-reaching reforms to European higher education in decades, leading to a new organization of university studies for all participating European Universities, allowing the creation of transnational multidisciplinary programmes with opportunities to deepen related topics and giving students a greater say and involvement in higher education social issues.

The AQUA-TNET Network consists of more than 100 partner institutions, representing universities, training organisations, associations and research performers working in aquaculture, fisheries and aquatic resource management, in 28 countries across Europe. Its members can be said to be representative of institutions and organisations which are eager to implement both the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA).

The Bologna Declaration (1999) made a commitment towards establishing a Higher European Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, to be pursued by means of six objectives:

- i) the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- ii) the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and postgraduate studies
- iii) the establishment of a system of credits
- iv) the promotion of mobility
- v) the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance
- vi) the promotion of the European dimension in higher education.

The Prague communique (2001) added three new elements of the EHEA

- vii) Lifelong learning
- viii) Involvement of students
- ix) Enhancing the competitiveness of European education (globalisation of education).

“Ministers emphasised that for greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes the adoption of common cornerstones of qualifications, supported by a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation functions, is necessary. Together with mutually recognised quality assurance systems such arrangements will facilitate students’ access to the European labour market and enhance the compatibility, attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education. The generalised use of such a credit system and of the Diploma Supplement will foster progress in this direction.”

It seemed however that in the years from 2001 to 2008, when Ministerial Meeting followed Ministerial Meeting at two-year intervals, that the Bologna Process assumed a momentum that seemed unstoppable, although the interested parties often found it hard to keep up with the pace of change. The Bologna Process was acting as a catalyst and was doing far more than merely harmonising the external structure of European 1st and 2nd degrees into a 3+2 format. The major changes in legislation needed to effect the reforms were taking place throughout Europe, however reluctantly in some cases. The Trends IV Report (2005) revealed that "reforms were a highly complex affair for institutions, with societal demands increasing, but with policy messages often conflicting with each other, and priorities difficult to establish."

Two years later, the situation has moved on, and the Trends V report (2007) contains significant findings not only on the implementation of new Bologna degree cycles but also on the attitudinal shift that seems to have taken place across the higher education sector.

Since this Report is based on more than 900 European higher education institutions who contributed either by responding to a wide-ranging questionnaire, or by hosting visits of research teams, or through providing input in other meetings. It is therefore wise to present its major findings as truly indicative of what is happening at grass roots level.

The report shows the progress made by Europe's universities in implementing the Bologna reforms, with the vast majority of the 908 institutions involved stating that they consider it vital to move rapidly towards a European Higher Education Area. In addition, Trends V also examines the response of higher education to lifelong learning, pays attention to the services in place to support students, and looks at the particular challenges being faced in the countries that are recent entrants to the Bologna process.

As the 2010 deadline set for the realisation of the European Higher Education Area approaches, the report demonstrates that there has been extraordinary change in European higher education, and that institutions are engaging seriously with the implementation of these reforms. Yet, the report also points out that the cultural impact of the Bologna process has often been under-estimated, that there remains much work to be done throughout society, and that the European Higher Education Area will continue to be "work in progress" well beyond 2010.

The Report states that higher education institutions (universities in the broad sense of the term) are more and more taking responsibility for the emerging EHEA. The focus has shifted from governmental actions to implementation of reforms within institutions, and there is broad support for more student-centred and problem based learning. However, there are other players in this broad area (which includes Learning Outcomes) who advocate a more cautious approach (S. Adams).

There is clear evidence of dramatic progress in relation to the implementation of structural reform, with 82% of institutions answering that they have the three cycles in place compared to 53% in 2003. Across Europe, there is no longer any question of whether or not reform of degree structures will take place, but rather a shift to considering whether the conditions and support are adequate to enable the process to be successful. In this respect the national understanding of reforms becomes crucial, and important questions remain with regard to different national interpretations of the nature and purposes of the three cycles, and whether these different national interpretations will prove to be compatible.

Employability is a high priority in the reform of curricula in all cycles. This concern transcends national boundaries and implementation priorities. However, the results also reveal that there is still much to be done to translate this priority into institutional practice. This seems strange, given the concern that higher education should be more responsive to the needs of a changing society and labour market. The Report indicates that one of the main challenges for the future is to strengthen dialogue with employers and other external stakeholders. This is an area where AQUA-TNET has been quite successful over the past three years.

One of the most problematic areas is that of student-centred learning, together with the drive to restructure academic courses in terms of learning outcomes. Institutions are slowly moving away from a system of teacher-driven provision, and towards a student-centred concept of higher education. Thus the reforms are laying the foundations for a system adapted to respond to a growing variety of student needs. Understanding and integrating the use of a learning outcomes based

approach remains a key medium-term challenge. When achieved, it will enable students to become the engaged subjects of their own learning process, and also contribute to improving many issues of progression between cycles, institutions, sectors, the labour market and countries.

ECTS, Diploma Supplement and Qualifications Frameworks.

The use of ECTS as both a credit accumulation and credit transfer system continues to become more widespread across Europe, with almost 75% of institutions reporting use of ECTS as a transfer system and over 66% as an accumulation system. Slightly less than half of Trends V respondents confirmed that they issue a Diploma Supplement to all graduating students. This reflects at least in part some of the findings of the AQUA-TNET survey. 100% of our positive respondents (40% of the total number) were also aware of and used either the Diploma or the Certificate Supplement.

Although qualifications frameworks are a topic of considerable policy debate, currently institutions – with the exception of those in Ireland – are generally confused as to whether or not their national system has such a qualifications framework, as well as to the purposes that it serves. This is also reflected in the general debate within the AQUA-TNET network.

The focus on quality in the Bologna process has certainly raised awareness within higher education institutions of the potential benefits and challenges of effective quality assurance activities. However, few of the AQUA-TNET members had gone down this path, though there were plans to do so.

With regard to mobility, it seems that the AQUA-TNET partners are at least abreast if not in advance of, of current trends in Europe. 100% of survey respondents (i.e., more than 50% of the network) stated that their institution did carry out international exchanges. 88% of respondents have an International Office, and a high 72.5% of institutions do provide financial help for international mobility, although in many cases this help is linked with the ERASMUS programme.

Recognition of student learning also remains an important challenge, with considerable difficulties still existing in relation to the recognition of learning that has taken place outside a national environment. This is also true of the AQUA-TNET members' experience, especially with regard to Joint Master degrees.

“Lifelong learning” is a term used, confusingly, to cover both continuing education and training for well-qualified graduates and initial education for disadvantaged groups, possibly through part-time higher education. While many institutions perceive lifelong learning as an emerging priority, there is little evidence that they have taken strategic action in this area. Here again, AQUA-TNET seems to be in advance of the general trend, as quite a lot of work has been carried out on the recognition of short courses and on work carried out in work placements.

Anecdotally, AQUA-TNET members are still bemused by the speed with which some of the Bologna reforms have taken place. They feel that there is often little or no consultation from higher authorities; sometimes their delayed response to certain key issues stem from the fact that internal communication is often very slow and cumbersome. Yet all would agree with the major findings of the Trends V report, that *“there is no longer any question of whether or not reform of degree structures will take place, but rather a shift to considering whether the conditions and support are adequate to enable the process to be successful”*.