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VISIONS OF A EUROPEAN FUTURE : BOLOGNA AND BEYOND

Keynote address by DR GUY HAUG
to the European Association for International Education (EAIE) Conference
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For those who have not had the possibility to attend the address to the EAIE conference in Maastricht, last December 1999, made by Guy Haug on the subject "Visions of a European Future: Bologna and beyond", please find here the full text kindly provided by Dr. Haug.

The full text of the Bologna Declaration and of the preparatory report «Trends and issues in European higher education » produced by Guy Haug and Jette Kirstein for the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the CRE (Association of European Universities) can be found on the website of the Danish Rectors' Conference : www.rks.dk/trends3.htm

"Dear colleagues,

I have about a half hour to try and convince you that the Bologna Declaration is not just one of those rather vague statements which sometimes emerge from ministerial meetings, but a key document which signals a turning point in the development of European higher education and will affect in one way or another everyone present in this room today.

I was involved in the Bologna process for the preparation of the background report for the Bologna meeting of educational leaders and ministers, which Jette Kirstein and myself produced for the Confederation of EU rectors' Conference and the CRE with support from the European Commission.

I will first stress the significance of Bologna, before sketching some broader observations for the future.

The significance of the Bologna Declaration

The Bologna Declaration came in the wake of the Sorbonne Declaration which was issued one year earlier and with which it shares several important common features. First, the two documents have the same ultimate goal (the gradual setting up of a European space for higher education); a second common feature is their approach, based on a joint effort between ministers and higher education representatives; third, both documents focus on structure rather than on content, and deal with "qualifications" rather than with academic degrees; and fourth, they both, maybe for the first time, pay attention to the international competitiveness of European higher education. The Sorbonne Declaration was followed by a debate on compatibility and harmonisation in higher education, but in a climate of confusion (mainly related to the alleged existence, or emergence, of a pattern of degrees after 3, 5, and 8 years in higher education, which it did not formally recommend but was associated with it in the mind of a

majority of commentators) and concern (mainly about the perceived attempt to impose a single model that would threaten diversity).

Against this background, the preparation of the Bologna conference required a survey aimed at mapping the areas of convergence and divergence in the current situation and current trends in higher education. Here is what we found:

- extreme diversity, to such a degree that it may well be called confusion, or even chaos; I acquired the conviction that the dense jungle of degrees, institutions and systems is the single biggest obstacle to more mobility in higher education in Europe;

- no convergence towards a strict 3-5-8 pattern of degrees: many countries have sub-degree programmes in 1 or 2 years, first degrees (whether traditional or newly introduced) take between 3 and 4 years, there is no 8 year standard duration for a doctorate, but there is a high degree of convergence around a total duration of about 5 years for master level studies; it was also clear that there was no ready-to-use external model (e.g. in the USA) that would be replicable, but that Europe needs to develop its own model to suit its unique cultural and educational needs;

- a convergent set of reforms recently introduced or in progress in several European countries: they signal a move towards shorter studies (reduction of actual length of studies to their theoretical duration, introduction of first degrees in systems where they were unknown), 2-tier degree structures (introduction of bachelor-type and master degrees instead of long, tunnel-type curricula which offer no successful exit point before 5, 6 or even 7 years of study), more credit systems, external evaluation, more autonomy coupled with more accountability. Another trend is towards the blurring of boundaries between the university and non-university sector (near-university status for some institutions, more bridges between the two sectors).

The report also found that both ministerial spheres and higher education institutions were largely aware of internal issues (those related to the need for more compatibility, access to the labour market, remaining structural obstacles to mobility), but were much less aware of external issues and challenges, in spite of the growth of transnational education and the signals pointing to decreasing attractiveness of European higher education in the rest of the world.

We also found in many countries a widespread willingness to reform and converge, combined with a lack of information about the intentions of other countries and the direction in which reforms should be planned in order to achieve greater compatibility and ease mobility.

The Bologna Declaration reflects most of the observations just made. But what is this really ? It is not only a vague political statement signed by 29 countries in Europe. It is more than just this; it actually sets out an action plan: there is a goal (to achieve a European space for higher education), there is a calendar (completion of the European space within the first decade of the new millenium, next meeting of ministers and higher education leaders to be held in Prague in 2001) and there is a programme of activities. What should be achieved ? Readable and comparable degrees, undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries, with a first degree

no shorter than 3 years and clearly relevant to the labour market, ECTS-compatible credit systems everywhere, a European dimension in quality assurance and an improvement of the free movement of students and teachers through structural reforms (basically, by taking away the remaining obstacles). This is the main thrust of the Bologna Declaration: a pledge freely taken by 29 countries to reform their own system in such a way that all systems converge.

I would like to add a few other comments about the Declaration. First, it should be pointed out that there was another document issued at the same time by student representatives present at the Bologna meeting. Students were not much involved in the preparatory work to the meeting, but during the meeting they produced a "Bologna Declaration of the students". It endorses some of the goals of the ministerial declaration, but expresses disagreement on some important items; in particular, students were not under the impression that European higher education was being so much challenged from outside; in their view, the first priority should rather be to fund more generously higher education in general, and mobility grants in particular.

Another important aspect of the official Bologna Declaration is that it includes an invitation to institutions of higher education to contribute to the success of the process of reform and convergence. This is something absolutely crucial for us all in higher education: the invitation is for us to get our own act together and to tell ministers in a convincing way what kind of European space for higher education we want. This is a unique opportunity as well as a real responsibility for the higher education community.

What can be expected in the coming months and years ?

First, one should expect a series of national reforms, possibly taking inspiration from those countries which recently reformed their systems in line with the Sorbonne and Bologna. Such national reforms can result from legislative or governmental action or from inter-institutional agreements at the national level. They are likely to go for a two-tier degree structure (bachelors- masters) mainly through the introduction of shorter first degrees, most likely combined with independent accreditation ; they are also likely to create more bridges between the university and non-university subystems and to lift - or at least to diminish- the restrictions imposed by national regulations on their own university-level, non-university sector.

Second, there is a work programme at the European level which is being prepared and this is already the run up towards Prague. This work programme is in essence intergovernmental, and I would hope that those European countries that were not invited to Bologna and hence have not signed the Bologna Declaration will be involved this time, and that a special effort will be made for the inclusion of countries in Southeast Europe. Although the process is going to be mainly intergovernmental, there is also going to be an input from the European Union: it is reassuring that the follow up to Bologna was an important item of the agenda of recent EU ministerial meetings and that it is a priority of the current Finnish presidency as well as of the upcoming Portuguese presidency which will start in a few weeks.

It is also important that this follow up work will be based on a dialogue between all signatory countries. Each will appoint a contact person specifically for questions relating to the Bologna process, and all these contact persons will jointly prepare the next stages. I hope also that students will now be involved more than they were in the preparation for Bologna. The dialogue should naturally also involve representative organisations of higher education institutions: the Association of European Universities (CRE), the Confederation of EU Rector's Conferences and others (I am thinking of Eurashe and of course of the EAIE).

What kind of action can be expected from this dialogue between ministries and higher education at the European level ? Progress is needed in the working out of the common framework of reference for qualifications; we are not talking about the creation of a new category of "European" degrees/qualifications, but of the setting up of a common reference for existing degrees/qualifications. Action can also be expected on academic credits and quality standards, and I hope that due attention will also be paid to international aspects, in particular to issues relating to transnational education.

What can universities and other types of higher education do ? The most important move they can take (and my view ought to take) is certainly to shape and structure their own offering in the light of the new post-Bologna environment; there are two particularly important changes which institutions could implement to profile themselves for the emerging European space for higher education :

- the introduction of meaningful first (undergraduate) degrees in systems where they do not traditionally exist; these courses need to be shorter, more flexible (in particular through the adoption of credit systems), more relevant to professional life, more multidisciplinary, more European and international; they should open access both to postgraduate studies and to the labour market;

- but maybe the newest aspect (and the one that would boost across-the-board reforms) in many countries would be the creation of new master's courses in environments where there were no short, or separate, programme at this level; if they are to meet the needs and expectations of mobile students from around the world, they should be relatively short (about 12 to 18 or no more than 24 months), and they should be clearly open to the participation of students who completed their undergraduate studies at a different institution or in a different country in Europe or elsewhere in the world. This is of course of absolutely crucial importance if reforms are to be successful: the aim is not simply to cut long curricula in two stages and to have the same students continue their studies in the same discipline, at the same institution in the same country, immediately after completing a bachelor's degree. There are real advantages for new master degrees to be offered by consortia of institutions rather than by just one university; the main benefit one could expect from the development of independent master's degrees would be to have a much wider redistribution of students entering the postgraduate level than we currently have. This could also pave the way to a new type of mobility: by and large, the current EU programmes have focussed on "horizontal" mobility (where students do abroad something which is accepted as a replacement of what they would have studied at their home institution); a new environment with a choice of diversified, relatively short, specialised master programmes

would encourage a form of "vertical" mobility, if a significant proportion of those holding a bachelor degree change universities (and possibly subject and/or country) for their postgraduate studies - not necessarily immediately after finishing their undergraduate studies. The extent to which this happens will probably be a very good indicator of how successful the whole reform process is going to be.

I will now give some indications of my main areas of concern for the post-Bologna developments. They are five.

First, there is the risk of non-concerted reforms. This could happen if some countries were to introduce superficial, window-dressing reforms, e.g. taking a long curriculum and just cutting it in bits and pieces, renaming these "credits" and awarding a bachelor after say the 7th semester of a traditional 5 to 6-year study programme; this would obviously not satisfy the criteria for meaningful first degrees which I outlined. There is also a chance that we see contradictory moves, in particular in certain countries where the definition of new first degrees or of master degrees could create a new type of difficulties if it does not fit in the common frame of reference.

A second risk, and a very serious one in case it became true, would be for countries to focus on very small differences (for example tracking the minor differences in content and organisation between a German and a Spanish degree in chemistry) rather than looking at the big common issues: while we may be struggling about minor details, this may divert our attention from the real challenge which is coming from outside.

The third risk I see is precisely that the challenge from abroad (transnational education, distance education, campuses abroad under the control of another European university or an overseas institution) remains under-estimated, and that neither governments nor higher education institutions are ready to see it and address it as a common issue.

The fourth risk would be that not all countries in Europe be included in the process of setting up the European space for higher education. I hope and believe that this can be avoided.

Fifth, maybe the most important risk which we are currently facing is that higher education institutions themselves under-estimate the level of change that has been announced and wake up a little bit too late. It is clearly an important responsibility of the EAIE to help disseminate the message to all those dealing with international aspects at higher education institutions in Europe; and it also the responsibility of those present today to inform others at their own university about the programme of change agreed upon in Bologna.

Turning now to important aspects not directly linked to Bologna, but with a foreseeable impact on the higher education scenery in Europe in the years ahead, my opinion is that we are about to enter a new era in the process of internationalisation in higher education. From this viewpoint I would first like to stress that the Bologna process is not an isolated phenomenon, and then I would like to point out some key differences between what has marked the decade of the nineties and what is likely to mark the next decade - in particular some upcoming challenges in the international arena.

As I said, the changes announced in Bologna are not an isolated process. They coincide with other major changes in the global environment in which we all operate. Let me just mention 4 such changes:

- the emergence of a real European labour market, which is bound to shape a good deal of the university offering and functioning in the years ahead: it is unlikely that the combination between a high rate of unemployment of graduates and a shortage of highly educated young people in key areas will be accepted much longer by society;

- the end of the strong numerical expansion at universities, which has already started in some countries and will soon start in several others; the kind of "natural" growth which universities enjoyed in the last decades is nearing its end and this entails a number of consequences; many universities will have to do something which they were at all accustomed to do, i.e. compete for students, especially since public funding in most countries is in one way or another dependent on student enrolment. This is something really new in many higher education communities; it can be expected that students' choice will increase and that institutions will have to pay more attention to their needs and satisfaction than in the past;

- Third, there is a considerable growth of new providers, many of them from abroad; this will add to the choice available to students and for the first time ever we may be in a position to see what they choose if they have a real possibility to choose from a spectrum of different types of education from inland and abroad. This raises fundamental questions which are however easy to ignore when other factors nourish the growth of annual intakes into higher education in a particular country: why would students choose a foreign provider, who may be rather expensive, rather than staying within their own national and often traditional system which comes for free ? As long as there was no choice, there was no question and hence no need to provide an answer; in future, universities will need to come up with answers.

- The fourth major change I see is that the accountability of universities for the use of public funds is likely to increase significantly in future; it seems to me particularly unlikely that public funding will be available to support institutions and students for studies much beyond the normal duration of studies; a distinct move in this direction has already started.

For these and other reasons, we are entering a new age in international education. The main thrust of the past decade has been on cooperation and exchanges within existing structures; in order to make this possible, efforts were started to create "transparency" between national systems which differ from each other in many respects and are sometimes quite difficult to reconcile; other distinctive features of the past decade are that programmes are mainly geared towards the europeanisation of institutions, they have been to a considerable extent EU-driven and have focussed on organised, "horizontal" mobility; their purpose has been to deal with diversity and its consequences and complexities, but without pushing for structural changes in the national systems.

The next decade is likely to continue some - maybe most- activities that have been developed during the past years. There is even a need to provide for further growth and improved quality of certain types of mobility. But

the tools put to use until now are reaching their limits: we still need them to do what they can achieve, but we need something more and something different.

The key features of the next decade are indeed likely to be different from those of the past. There are reasons to believe that we have entered a phase in which structural change will become the core development - including the boosting of mobility, through structural measures such as the elimination of regulatory or administrative obstacles, easier access to more complete information, and the provision of freer choice. While higher education has been increasingly internationalising over the last 10 to 15 years, it may just now be entering a cycle marked by a certain degree of "de-nationalisation". Probably we will more and more try to organise diversity, in order to limit the confusion or even chaos than can result from the total absence of convergent action in a region made up of so many different countries. I also believe that we are entering a phase where intergovernmental action, encompassing the whole of Europe (not only the EU), will play a growing role - hopefully in close interplay with universities. We are likely to see new forms of mobility, in particular more "vertical" mobility and more 'free movers" (especially at the postgraduate level) in a more readable environment with fewer structural obstacles to the individual initiative of students as well as teachers.

Last but not least, I expect more attention to be given to the position of Europe with respect to the rest of the world. For example, most of the consortia and networks which we have in Europe have mainly functioned as structures for internal cooperation and exchanges, i.e. for the various types of activities between the members of the consortium or network. There is likely to be a whole new range of possibilities for these consortia/networks focussing on the development of joint activities abroad (outside of Europe). One of the most important changes I would expect in the years ahead is that Europe (in particular, but not exclusively, the European Union) will pay more attention to the external aspects of its policies, including those in the area of higher education. This should lead to a change of focus from intra-European -or intra-EU activities - to European programmes for joint activities elsewhere in the world. I would like to mention three developments related to this.

- First, it seems to me essential that we should close the competitive gap at home; this would mean in particular that higher education institutions in Europe should endeavour to put together and publicise the kind of educational opportunities students from the rest of the world would like to find on offer in Europe; closing the competitive gap at home would also require that the limitations imposed on some of our best non-university institutions, which severely penalise them in the international arena, should be lifted.

- Secondly, it has become vitally important that we regulate transnational education; there is currently a legal vacuum in this area, with most countries ignoring this new type of education in their legal system; the aim of legislative action in this area should not be to try and prohibit transnational education - attempts to do so would most likely be doomed anyway; but it has become essential to differentiate between "legitimate" educational activities and those which do not offer sufficient guarantee and are not worth the time and money of our students. Quality transnational education broadens the choice of students and may represent a

valuable alternative to traditional education. It is amazing that the possible inclusion of "educational services" into the upcoming round of negotiations within the World Trade Organisation does not receive more attention in Europe, neither from governments, the press or higher education itself : the vast majority of rectors and international relations managers seem to be totally unaware of, or uninterested in these developments, however important they may be for the future of higher education as a key area in the worldwide competition.

- Thirdly, European higher education needs to learn to compete better in the world markets for higher education; there also, I do not think that the real problem is that there are so many US campuses in Europe or in Asia, but rather that there are so few European campuses in the US, Latin America or other regions in the world. This is an area of paramount importance, and it seems to me essential that European universities should mobilise their energies and resources to compete in the world market: through the setting up of the type of courses which may suit the needs of overseas students, through increased information and marketing efforts to attract students (including paying students, not only exchange students) from other continents. In order to be able to fully enter this competition, European universities need to become much more present on site and to get organised. Contrary to what I keep hearing from many in continental Europe, universities from the UK, the US or Australia do not attract foreign students just because they teach in English: they have also invested for years, and sometimes decades, to offer the right type of courses, user-friendly student services (e.g. accommodation) and understandable degrees, and to publicise and explain their offering through permanent representations and recruitment efforts on site. The majority of universities in Europe still lack the mindset and the experience required in the growing competition for students and the related revenues. This is most conspicuous in certain key areas, such as registration procedures, non-educational student services (e.g. accommodation) and of course, sadly enough, visa policies; the visa policies applied by several European countries have had a disastrous impact on their image as potential destinations for academic purposes among students and faculty from most of the rest of the world.

There are many strengths in European higher education. First and foremost, I think that quality is still very high when compared internationally. Diversity, if properly used, can also be a strength. The process of European integration itself could be used as a "selling point". Tuition fees are comparatively low, and the overall cost advantage which Europe may offer to students from the world, which is currently often interpreted as a signal of lower quality, could be turned into a strong competitive advantage if properly explained.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues: I believe we are currently at a moment in time when we need to act, mainly because the cost of the status quo would be extremely high. It would create internally in Europe a new split between certain universities, not all located in the same country, which have fully integrated the world dimension of higher education, and other educational institutions which have not. The need to act is also commensurate with the external challenge facing European higher education - even though this challenge has not yet been fully acknowledged. In addition, we need to meet the high expectations of our students and the

broader society: from all the areas where European citizens expect action and results from European integration, education comes regularly as number one in opinion polls. Let's not frustrate these hopes.

Not only is there a need to act: now is also the right time to act. We will move from the cooperation/mobility phase to the phase of structural change, and it is high time that we fully recognise the nature and the size of the challenge with which a rapidly expanding transnational education is facing us.

It is therefore from this viewpoint particularly important to see that there is a willingness to act: in Bologna, governments as well as the higher education community have signalled their intention to act and there is a work programme for the coming years.

Last but not least, there are means to act. We are not starting from zero: there is a broad range of tools which can be put at use. I am thinking of ECTS, the NARIC network, the Diploma Supplement, the European Quality Network, and of all these consortia and networks which have developed and accumulated experience in the past years.

Universities and other institutions of higher education need to take on the challenge to build up a compatible, effective system within Europe, and a competitive one towards the rest of the world. The challenge is not only to adapt to the new environment shaped by world trends and the Bologna process. The real challenge is that in Bologna, as already before at the Sorbonne, the higher education community has been invited to make an input. In order to be in a position to provide this input, we in higher education need to figure out clearly what we want ministers, governments, the European Union and other international actors to do.

Thank you very much for attention."

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