

# CURRENT TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE<sup>\*</sup>

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## Where to start?

How do we approach the issue? Any attempt to define *current trends* demands us to divide and distinguish them from *previous trends*. The logic of current trends could merely follow previous trends. Sometimes their logic might differ in appearance but still be rooted in earlier trends. Sometimes the logic of current trends is clearly opposed to the logic of previous trends. In order to understand the substance of current (or present) trends it is necessary to establish their relationship with the past. Yet, past and present are relative notions. If it is today's higher education that is under scrutiny, then where and when should we begin? What is the point of breaking off from *previous* higher education?

To give a general – and now in practice the most often used – description of recent processes in European higher education we may use the term *Bologna Process* or the *emerging European Higher Education Area* (EHEA). This »new European higher education brand« (Zgaga, 2003, 98) symbolises a whole set of important policy issues in higher education which have been broadly discussed at institutional, national and European levels since 1999. However, if we look more closely at some of these issues it becomes obvious that the 'Bologna agenda' has an important pre-history. The ideas presented in the *Sorbonne Declaration* of 1998 are its direct predecessor. Yet these ideas were even emerging in previous debates: in preparing national policy responses to problems of the development of higher education, in comparing and confronting these responses (and the logic behind them) in a broader arena such as e.g. within European Union consultation processes or within the Council of Europe and Unesco as in the case of the *Lisbon Recognition Convention*. These debates would have been very different had a decision to enlarge the European Union or had the turbulent events seen in Central and East Europe at the end of the 1980s etc. not occurred.

The background is thus expanding. However, our task here is not to start writing a modern history of higher education in Europe; it is about *summarising current trends* in different parts of Europe. At this point, however, it is necessary to define the *turning point* at which the issues and problems of modern higher education are rooted irrespective of national contexts. Recent literature reveals a high level of consensus that this turn is most closely linked to the *transition from elite to mass higher education*. Historically, in the developed countries it occurred during the period of industrial growth after the Second World War. At the beginning of the 1970s it was already clear that universities had entered a new era – but *which era*? The transition from elite to mass higher education involves a shift we probably still do not understand in all of its dimensions.

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## The dimensions of mass higher education and its challenges

Thus, the expansion of higher education began during the 1960s. The increased demand for places at universities was a combined result of economic development and a higher number of candidates from the relevant age groups. The greater demand was clearly not some abstract arithmetic outcome. It was not only a simple response to growing employment options. It was also a result of the population's higher social and cultural expectations. Despite the obvious fact that this expansion was driven by economic and political factors which were more or less common to various developed industrial countries of the West, there were clear differences in its 'national tempos'. Behind the increase in particular countries we can recognise special national circumstances: shifts in home politics, social and cultural backgrounds, particularities of the functioning of national higher education systems etc. Since the 1980s, changes in the economy, technology and the labour market have further reinforced the existing demand for higher-level training and *at the turn of the millennium the academic landscape was totally different from that seen in the 1960s*.

In the so-called EU-15 countries, the number of students in higher education more than doubled in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Annex – *Figure 1*). A relatively moderate increase can be noticed in traditionally well-developed higher education systems (Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and France), while the highest increases are more characteristic for the 'suburbs' (Portugal, Greece, Ireland and Spain) and/or those countries which joined the EU at later stages. In the early period after the Second World War only *a few percent* of young people – predominantly *male* – undertook higher education (similarly to their parents' generation); at the end of the century there was on average already almost *one-third of the age cohort* in higher education while the number of *female* students had already overtaken their male colleagues in many countries (Eurostat, 2003, pp. 90-106). These shifts are simply incredible from previous points of view but they also pose serious questions for current policy-making at different levels. Certainly, these trends are not merely limited to Western European countries (see Annex – *Figure 2*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Canada and the United States exceeded the limit of a 50-percent *gross enrolment ratio* in higher education already in 1980; in 1990 they even reached 71.2 and 72.2 percent, respectively. During the same period, Australia shifted from 25.2 to 35.0 percent, New Zealand from 27.0 to 44.5 percent, South Korea from 14.7 to 37.7, while Japan decreased slightly from 30.5 to 28.7 (Unesco, 1993, pp. 144-147). Using the same *gross enrolment ratio* methodology, in 1990 Western European countries mostly achieved a ratio close to one-third of the age group (Finland with 48.2 at one extreme and Portugal with 22.6 at the other) while the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were close to one-quarter (former East Germany with 34.8 and Bulgaria with 30.1 at one extreme, former Czechoslovakia with 17.0 and Hungary with 14.5 at the other; Romania with 8.6 and Albania with 7.0 seem to be special cases at that time). For more recent (2002/03) ratios, see Table 1 in [Canning, Mary, Martin Godfrey, Dorota Holzer-Zelazewska. (2005)], p. 8. The increase during the last ten years has been immense, particularly in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

*Gross enrolment ratio*: »Total enrolment in education at third level, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the five-year age group following on from the secondary school leaving age« (Unesco, 1993, p. 113).

The political changes in Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s brought about, *inter alia*, an even more noticeable increase in the number of students in higher education. The relative delay of the 1970s and 1980s was more than compensated for during the 1990s in almost all of these countries.<sup>2</sup> Europe got rid of its internal divisions and today it is somewhat easier to make comparisons.<sup>3</sup> When we observe Europe in a politically non-polarised and geographically broader context, the growth of student numbers in higher education slowed down in Western Europe – in a few cases it was even negative: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy (Eurostat, 2003, 90-91), whereas it achieved the highest peaks in Central and Eastern Europe (with the exception of Bulgaria). During the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, growth in student numbers is marked by an index of only 105 in the EU-15 and even 150 in the EU+10; an integrated index for the EU-25 is 111 (see Annex – *Figure 3*). Naturally, the increase in student numbers gradually led to an improved share of the *population with a tertiary educational attainment* (here we leave questions of quality and effectiveness aside). On average, 21 percent of the population aged 25-64 had attained a tertiary education in the EU-15 by 2002. Today, twice as many children obtain tertiary education qualifications than their parents.<sup>4</sup>

Nowadays, Europe – and not just Europe – is being challenged by a *population decrease*: there are fewer and fewer young people in almost all countries. The high enrolment ratios achieved during the last few decades will surely continue and even increase to over one-half of the relevant age group; on the other hand, the decrease in the young population is expected to reduce *in absolute figures* the demand for places in the – now extremely expanded – higher education sector. This shift will pose – in fact it is already posing – new challenges in addition to the already known challenges of mass higher education.

In Europe, primary education became a standard (or at least a standard expectation) for the entire population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, still in the early age of industrial society. Yet, in practical terms it was only achieved much later. During the economic recovery after the Second World War, on the way towards a post-industrial society, this standard expectation was upgraded to upper-secondary education; which is still to be fully realised.<sup>5</sup> At the turn of the millennium, at the entrance to the knowledge society, such

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<sup>2</sup> Also see the chapter on higher education in the EU-8 compared to the EU-15 in Canning, Godfrey, Holzer-Zelazewska, 2005, pp. 6-10.

<sup>3</sup> From methodological and interpretative points of view it is always necessary to warn about just comparing abstract figures and not taking different political systems, cultures, education sectors etc. into account.

<sup>4</sup> The geographical distribution is still large: there are Finland (32) and Belgium (28) on one side and Italy (10) and Portugal (9) on the other. The picture does not differ so much in the countries of the EU+10: from Lithuania (44) and Estonia (30) to Poland or Czech Republic (12) and Slovakia (11). The generation distribution is also large: e.g., in the countries of the EU-15 there is only 15 percent of those with a tertiary education attainment in the age group 55-64 years but still 27 percent in the age group 25-34 years. Between 1996 and 2002, the highest increase in a population with a tertiary education attainment was noticed in Finland (+ 11) followed by France and Spain (+ 6) and the United Kingdom (+ 4). The EU-15 average for this period is + 3 percent (Eurostat, 2003, p. 29). It should not be overlooked that these shifts mostly belong to changes in enrolment during the 1980s; last but not least, it was a period when the ‘baby boom’ generations of the 1960s and 1970s were entering tertiary education.

expectations seem to have finally encompassed tertiary education: »A historic shift is occurring in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: tertiary education is replacing secondary education as the focal point of access, selection and entry to rewarding careers for the majority of young people« (OECD, 1998, p. 20).

The reasons people in the modern world decide to commence higher education differ considerably from the past. Nevertheless, we can still fully understand traditional individual aims like the 'pursuit of truth' and 'disinterested research' or a simple desire to join a profession (or continue a family tradition in practicing a profession) in order to help people care about their body, property or soul – while simultaneously gaining a highly recognised status in society. We can understand our predecessors but we also know that the specific social contexts in which our individual aims and wishes are formed in concrete ways have changed greatly since previous times. In ancient Egypt, literacy was a very high privilege for a very limited stratum of people; yet it is a non-disputable demand of all of us today and we learn to read and write at the very beginning of our schooling. In the early industrialisation period, there was a common belief that all workers needed to read and write (yet, some people tried to neglect this for a longer time); today it is one of the main family and social concerns to grant all young people through the education system at least a secondary vocational qualification – including as a qualification to continue higher education. Rewarding careers – not for the minority but *for the majority of young people* – are today offered by advanced training. Higher education is no longer primarily a personal *call* or *privilege*; it is a *social demand*: modern societies cannot function without increasing the number of educated and skilled people who work in the economy and public services or without expanding the research and knowledge that drive modern civilisation.

Modern universities can be happy about this. Yet complaints have instead quite often been heard from the academic world. If one takes these complaints seriously then it is difficult to ignore their arguments. Mass higher education has totally changed the traditional university. Classes grew in size and lectures delivered in big halls became a metaphor for higher education; a metaphor which has been broadly used in the media. The increasing numbers of students led to criticisms by (not only) teachers regarding falling standards and today's students alleged ignorance. The growth in student numbers was not being accompanied (at least not proportionally) by new teachers. Nevertheless, today there are many more teachers – and many more new higher education institutions – than before but there is also a new popular discourse concerning 'excellent', 'average', 'poor' or even 'scandalous' teachers and institutions. Yet, these complaints should stem from students not academics!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> »European Benchmark: by 2010, at least 85% of 22-year-olds in the EU should have completed upper-secondary education«. The present level (2004) of the upper-secondary completion rate in the EU is 76.4%; the best three performing countries (all are from the EU+10: Slovakia, Czech Republic and Slovenia) are already at the level of approximately 90% (Commission Staff Working Paper, 2005, pp. 16 and 20).

<sup>6</sup> Derek Bok, formerly President of Harvard University, cites in his noteworthy book (first edition 2003) on »the commercialization of higher education« sentiments of an American senior student »from a large state university« which could also be agreed to by many students from European universities: »In my four years at ..., I have had exactly four classes with under twenty-five students and a real professor in charge. All the

Were universities ready to cope with the challenges of mass higher education when they started to appear? Obviously not! The new situation was quite a surprise for everybody. Over several years (some) people understood that the world had changed and that the university is in a position to reconsider its *mundane mission*. The 'splendid', 'optimal' but closed and isolated universe of the *ivory tower* could be just a myth.<sup>7</sup> If one-third of an age cohort comes instead of 2 percent then there are not only 'born talents' among them; however, they all deserve active and quality teaching and we should not just wait to see who will succeed and who will be left in the field. It is excellent if the need to know has spread so much! Today, if the government seeks higher enrolment levels and new study programmes with an emphasised vocational dimension for the sake of improved employability and general welfare then rectors should consider this with due attention. Finally, it would not be in line with *academic* traditions if they did not hear voices outside closed towers: a part of these traditions has been also to serve society.<sup>8</sup>

*Modern university is not a monastery.* As the 'pursuit of truth' might sound a little 'transcendent', the university as a place of learning and research has in certain ways always been open and connected to society.<sup>9</sup> Modern theories on university and higher education institutions generally distinguish between their several genuine roles or tasks. To undertake research and teaching, that is: (1) to maintain and develop an advanced knowledge base; (2) to train – the young and the not so young – people for their professional careers; (3) to prepare them for a life as active citizens in a democratic society; and (4) to contribute to their personal growth. On the other hand, since mass higher education emerged numerous writers have been stressing that academic institutions should be *responsive* to society.

This is absolutely correct yet it is only half of the truth. Precisely for the multiple roles they play in culture and society, today academic institutions should not only be *responsive* (*receptive*) but also *responsible* (*pro-active*): »while *responding* to society's needs and demands, universities have also to assume a crucial *responsibility* towards society. [...] The great difference between being responsive and being responsible lies in

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rest of my courses have been jumbo lectures with hundreds of students and a professor miles away, or classes with TAs [graduate student teaching assistants], or not regular faculty« (Bok, 2005, 89).

<sup>7</sup> »As defined pejoratively, the ivory tower is a myth, because in modern institutions of higher education there has always existed tension between service to the public and more contemplative scholarship« (Rosovsky, 2002, p. 14). Rosovsky prescribes the first application of the metaphor 'ivory tower' to universities or scholars to H.G. Wells in *The New World Order* (1940).

<sup>8</sup> »To summarise: the ivory tower does not describe the modern research university: learning and service are always present. External influences are becoming more powerful for many different reasons: the power of government, the search by commercial interests for knowledge within the academy, the perpetual need for more resources within the university, and – not least – the opportunity for individual faculty members to make economic gains.« A splendid isolation couldn't be an alternative to external influences; Rosovsky argues that the 'external permeability' has a parallel in the 'internal' permeability (e.g. disciplinary barriers). The real question – which we postpone for later – is: »Can universities preserve their objectivity as disinterested researchers and social critics if current trends persist?« (Rosovsky; 2002, p. 18)

<sup>9</sup> »The universities were both a result of and a driving force behind the rationalisation and urbanisation process that went hand in hand with the opening-up of society« (Zonta, 2002, p. 26).

the fact that in the first case, universities should be receptive to what society expect from them; in the second case, they should have an ambition to guide reflection and policy-making in society. While universities excel at making new discoveries in all disciplines of science and technology, they must also scrutinize systemically the trends that might affect soon or later the well being of populations, and, if necessary, raise criticism, issue alarm signals and make recommendations« (Weber, 2002, 62-63).

Universities do not exist just for some 'external purposes'; they are (also) a legitimate place to reflect them. Further, reflecting changes in higher education, coping with the challenges of mass higher education, taking part with other institutions in policy analysis and acting with stakeholders – this is all part of their mission. Higher education has become a recognised field of research because it is an equally important area for 'external society' as it is for academic institutions themselves. Academics should also deploy their own intellectual resources to take stock of modern changes seen in higher education.

When analysing contemporary changes in British higher education, Gordon Graham, a Professor at the University of Aberdeen, makes an interesting critical note on the academic protests seen in the UK in the 1980s and concludes with some serious, radical questions. He distinguishes two sources for their »mixed and muted« reactions: »First, there was serious anxiety, one might almost say panic, about how to cope with the end of regime in which their jobs were secure and the flow of resources to support them seemingly unlimited. Second, there was deep uncertainty about what exactly it was that they could say in their own defence. What *were* universities for? Why *should* society at large value them? Was there not *something* to be said for radical revision and review?« (Graham, 2002, 17).

Other questions can also be found in the fundamentals of contemporary higher education policy. Below, we will not so much tackle these fundamental questions but rather the formation of contemporary higher education policy and some of the most interesting questions relating to current trends in European higher education.

### **The dimensions of internationalisation and its challenges to higher education policy**

A review of the past few decades shows that the expanding tertiary education sector – in particular the democratising and liberalising of access<sup>10</sup> – put the need for systemic reforms firmly on national and institutional agendas. A few years ago, the Eurydice network produced a very useful study of reforms in European higher education in the 1980s and 1990s (Eurydice, 2000) which provides an insight into these processes at an *international level* and which we will also draw upon here.

This comparative study allows an insight into systemic changes among the reviewed 18 European countries. In all countries, policy and legislative activities were particularly condensed at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s. They show »a large number of

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<sup>10</sup> An increased output from upper secondary education as well as opening higher education to previously under-represented (social, age, gender, etc.) groups and non-traditional and vocational qualifications prove that profound changes have been put in place not only in higher education: educational systems as a whole have undergone substantial changes. However, this is not a central question here.

convergent trends in higher education« among individual countries but the study states that »there is no evidence that these developments were the result of a concerted approach between participating countries. The convergent education policies seem more likely to be a by-product of the economic and social policies which, in the context of European integration, underwent a deliberate harmonisation process« (Eurydice, 2000, 174).

This statement seems a little surprising from today's point of view: the convergent education policies are just a by-product! Within the EU-25 action *Education and Training 2010* »an open method of co-ordination« (OMC) established (Commission, 2001, 14)<sup>11</sup>, also in the field of (higher) education or more broadly within the 45 countries of the *Bologna Process*, »a concerted approach between participating countries« which today seems to be a normal method of working. However, we should not forget that this is quite a recent achievement and hence also a result of coping with the challenges of mass higher education as well as international trends in higher education.

In the perception of many generations European universities have predominantly been *national* universities. This perception may vary according to national circumstances and levels of influencing and co-operating with other countries and universities; nevertheless, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we experienced (national) *borders* between (national) higher education systems and sometimes even between national institutions. Yet, there were no geographical, political and/or institutional barriers for universities in the middle ages.<sup>12</sup> National (higher) education systems were born parallel to the industrialisation processes in modern national states. As a sub-chapter to the protection of domestic markets, protective measures in the field of (higher education) qualifications emerged and various *recognition procedures* (predominantly for professional recognition) were put in place. However, due to the universal character of science and culture as well as centuries-long academic traditions certain compatible elements persisted throughout the otherwise 'incompatible' national systems. Universities continued to co-operate in the given circumstances and to the given extent and students still went to study abroad but both institutions and individuals encountered many obstacles for either economic or ideological reasons (or both).

After awakening from the disasters of two world wars, in Europe the idea of lowering borders and reintegrating the continent acquired firm grounds. In half a century it totally changed its previous physiognomy. It is not the place here to make value judgments or continue the old debate on 'historical progress'. Yet it is important to establish that political openness and economic co-operation have also produced many incentives for higher education. Since the post-Second World War period, universities have not only been challenged by *mass higher education* but also by *rapid internationalisation*. This

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<sup>11</sup> The OMC originates in the Lisbon EC Presidency Conclusions of 2000 (par. 37); it is »inspired by economic policy co-ordination« between the Member States and »on one hand [...] provides orientation towards common outcomes or objectives in a given policy area; on the other, [it] is an instrument for identifying good policy practice from among the grand reservoir of diverse policy approaches in the European area« (Commission, 2005a, 23).

<sup>12</sup> »Until the sixteen century European universities were to a large extent all organized on the same line. They showed no national particularities or local focuses. [...] The picture changed with [...] the emergence of the European nation state« (Zonta, 2002, p. 32-33).

second challenge was important for at least two reasons: on one hand, to enable comparisons of the various advantages and disadvantages of individual systems as well as systemic responses and policy practices and, on the other, to become truly aware of the numerous obstacles to international academic co-operation and mobility and to strive for improvements.

Still, policy and legislative activities and measures remained within relatively closed national frameworks at least up until the late 1980s. Within international co-operation frameworks, education has been often regarded with certain caution, even jealousy, as 'a national affair'. Against these attitudes, the late 1980s brought some new and convincing arguments from the 'outside' («economic and social policies», as the Eurydice study says, and even more). Several different factors – the globalisation of markets and economies, political shifts and integration processes within Europe and globally, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the free movement of people, growing multiculturalism etc – accumulated and influenced governments to also start *intergovernmental and international discussions on education policies*. The emerging new reality, fractionating and interlinking of various horizons<sup>13</sup> has started to argue *against the incompatibilities* of national (higher) education systems. As a result, informal and formal international forums dealing with policy issues have been formed aiming for the first time at »a concerted approach between participating countries«. Since it seemed before that the development of national education could only be possible if 'pure' national needs and circumstances are taken into account, the new reality has led to the realisation that – for the sake of national progress – supranational or international dimensions should also be seriously taken into higher education policy considerations.

Nevertheless, education was left for a long time outside or at least on the margins of European integration. Community action programmes in (higher) education date back to 1976 but they were relatively sporadic. The second half of the 1980s brought action programmes for research and student mobility: today's well-known *Erasmus* programme was launched in 1987 and, parallel to it, the *European Credit Transfer System* (ECTS) was created<sup>14</sup> to facilitate mobility and the recognition of short periods of study within the institutions and countries involved. With the political changes seen in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s similar programmes – the best known is the *Tempus* programme – have been established for the much broader (not only European) area. The EU also offered the forum needed to discuss the development of higher education in a new, supranational context.<sup>15</sup> However, a much more important novelty for the promotion

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<sup>13</sup> These factors should not be observed as linear, simply accumulating energy for a change. They can be fragmented, with different intensity and different time-schedule in different regions, even contradicting. Taken all together in their heterogeneity they represent the context and levers of historical changes.

The <sup>14</sup> ECTS was originally created for the 1989-1995 period and limited to five subject areas. After receiving many good responses, it was extended to new subject areas and prolonged in 1995. Since the Bologna Declaration it has been an international tool in European higher education with a growing reputation.

<sup>15</sup> The *Memorandum on Higher Education in EC* (1991) is an early result of these discussions; it already pointed out: »The challenge of science and technology is central to European competitiveness and economic progress and requires that Europe is in the forefront, not merely in the generation of new knowledge, but also in its dissemination and application to economic life. Science and technology will also



and development of the internationalisation of higher education as well as of higher education policy was introduced by the *EU Treaty* in the early 1990s.

On the highest formal level, the *Maastricht Treaty* (formally the *Treaty on European Union*; signed in February 1992) recognised for the first time the European Community's responsibility to promote *co-operation in education* between European countries. The 1992 stipulation was repeated in the *Amsterdam Treaty* of 1999 without any substantial change.<sup>16</sup> According to this provision, the Community »shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.« The provision also stresses that incentive measures will be adopted at the 'supranational level' but »excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulations of the Member States« (*Treaty*, 1992). A similar provision involved vocational education and training.

Thus, education in the EU is mainly a forum for the exchange of ideas and good practices; its role is not to create a common (only one; supranational) education policy but to create a system of co-operation between the EU Member States (OMC; see note 11). Education remains a primary government concern (the *subsidiarity* principle); the Member States preserve their rights in terms of the content and organisation of education and training systems. However, Community action programmes in particular are an important lever working towards '*the European dimension in (higher) education*' and the co-ordination activities actually acting in the direction of a 'soft harmonisation'. Since the EU has been enlarged and its action programmes in education and training have been opened – under certain conditions – also to non-member countries, the 'EU forum's' effect of discussions and actions on policy development in various parts of today's Europe has increased.

Another forum for higher education policy and common activities has been provided by *international organisations*; the preparation and signing of the *Lisbon Recognition Convention* (1992-1997) as an influential project has already been mentioned.<sup>17</sup> The role of organisations like the OECD and the World Bank has also started to strengthen and taken on new dimensions in various parts of Europe and globally. On the other side, some influential *regional initiatives* have also been launched which have strengthened the mobility of students and teachers but also helped in 'concerting' education policies:

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be interacting more strongly with the cultural, social and human aspects of daily living, bringing new opportunities and constraints and fostering many innovative approaches in society. [...] The developed economies of Europe must strive to follow high skill strategies in order to increase the flexibility and productivity of their industries« (p. 3).

<sup>16</sup> See *Treaty*, 1992, Articles 126 and 127; *Treaty*, 1999, Articles 149 and 150. The essence of these provisions was also preserved in the draft EU Constitution of 2003; comp. *Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe*. Adopted by consensus by the European Convention on 13 June and 10 July 2003. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2003, pp. 174-176 (Articles III/182-III/183).

<sup>17</sup> The *Lisbon Recognition Convention* has always found echoes in the Bologna documents starting with the *Sorbonne Declaration* (1998): »The convention set a number of basic requirements [on recognition] and acknowledged that individual countries could engage in an even more constructive scheme«.

*Nordplus* (Nordic countries, 1988), *Pushing Back the Borders* (the Netherlands, Flemish Community of Belgium and three German *Länder*, 1991), *Ceepus* (Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies, 1993) etc.

*The Bologna Process* as the most important international forum aiming at the development and 'concerting' of higher education policies among European countries was launched precisely within this context. The original initiative, the *Sorbonne Declaration* of 1998, was a joint statement of only four Ministers of Education (from France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom) aiming at the »harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system«. It stated that »Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well« and called »on other Member States of the Union and other European countries to join us in this objective« (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). In fact, not many countries accepted this call; on the contrary, it provoked from today's point of view a relatively strange dispute over the term '*harmonisation*'.<sup>18</sup> It seems that its context was confounded – deliberately or not, that can remain a question – by the '*excluded harmonisation*' of Article 126 of the *Maastricht Treaty*. Finally, a new ministerial meeting of by then altogether 29 countries was organised and in June 1999 the *Bologna Declaration* was signed, avoiding such disputable terms and issues and launching the broadest international higher education policy development forum so far. Today, 45 countries are already participating. Since the 2001 Prague Conference, the European Commission has been a full member of the Bologna follow-up group and the Council of Europe is its consultative member.

The Bologna Process was from the very beginning an *inter-ministerial* initiative but over the years international political organisations and academic associations have acquired an increasingly important position within it. Indeed, the initiative would be particularly sterile if academic representatives were not invited to join in from the beginning. Rectors from many European universities participated at the Bologna Conference in June 1999 and their presence was in a way symbolic. Eleven years before, in 1988, the old Bologna University hosted another important conference: at this conference, rectors from numerous European universities adopted the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.<sup>19</sup> This was an

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<sup>18</sup> The French Minister of that time Claude Allègre reacted to these disputes, e.g.: »For this reason, we took the initiative last year [...] in holding the Sorbonne meeting on European 'harmonisation'. Yet I became aware that some people in Europe did not understand what this expression meant. 'Harmony' is the guiding principle of the orchestra [*finalité de l'orchestre*] some of whose members play the drum, others the trumpet and yet others, the piano or violin. To each, his or her instrument and differing musical score, yet with 'harmony' the end result. As I see it, Europe is like such an orchestra. [...] We have no wish, any of us, to lose our identity. In each country, the education system has often been the product of major struggles. [...] For this reason, any attempt to 'manufacture' Europe by gutting individual nations should be rejected. Neither is 'convergence' an ideal term either because, in physics or mathematics in particular, it implies that, at a certain point in time, uniformity is reached.« *Discours de Claude Allègre au 40<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la conférence des recteurs européens*. Bordeaux, 20 et 21 mai 1999. Downloaded from the Internet <http://www.education.gouv.fr/realisations/education/superieur/cre.htm> (05.11.2004).

<sup>19</sup> The Magna Charta was adopted »four years before the definitive abolition of boundaries between the countries of the European Community« (Magna Charta, 1991, p. 59) and two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall to stress the importance of autonomy as a traditional academic value *for universities in a new age*. Upon this opportunity, the Rector Magnificus of Bologna University said in his speech: »In the name of the unity of culture the needs for supranationality of Universities could once more confront the

early and highly influential contribution from the academic side to all those initiatives and ideas which finally, ten years later, flowed together to create the Bologna Process.

In political terms, the *Bologna Process is clearly a success*. It has become the broadest policy forum on higher education so far.<sup>20</sup> As an inter-ministerial forum of the original EU Member States and associated countries it has found ways to define responsibilities between Member States and the Commission (»excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulations«) as well as to broaden its membership far beyond the 'EU external borders' to encompass today's 45 European countries. It has avoided the centralisation of its follow-up structures and has not been bureaucratised. It has also found ways to attract various consultative members who have taken up their responsibilities very actively. The 'Bologna agenda' would simply be unfeasible if the representatives of academic institutions and students were not treated equally as partners at the roundtable where the representatives of employers and trade unions as well as QA agencies also found a place at the last landmark, namely the Bergen Conference.<sup>21</sup>

Is this still an *inter-ministerial* forum? The Bologna Process will surely have a lot to do until 2010 and beyond. On one hand, the inter-ministerial forum at the present stage seems to need an upgrade to become an *inter-governmental* forum for the sake of efficiency;<sup>22</sup> while, on the other, it seems that implementation of the newly agreed common higher education policy (aiming at establishing the EHEA) could suffer from the lack of more binding tools and structures.<sup>23</sup> Yet this issue will be left for further

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difficulties ensuing from the birth of national States and nationalisms. [...] For sure one does not strive for the uniformity of statutes and structures, but for possibility to exchange views in all directions thanks to general and convinced acceptance of principles. [...] The society into which this new University has to integrate itself is the advanced industrial society of our time: a society based on the rapidity of exchanges and information and on the mobility of men and things. It would be a serious mistake if the University, in this new society, decided to withdraw into itself, into its pride of academic corporation« (Magna Charta, 1991, p. 59, pp. 11, 12, 13).

<sup>20</sup> Similar initiatives seem to be emerging in other parts of the world; e.g. the ALCUE (*America Latina y el Caribe – Unión Europea*) Common Area for Higher Education.

<sup>21</sup> European academic associations are an important part of the so-called formal 'Bologna structures'. The European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions of Higher Education (EURASHE) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) have been 'consultative members' of the inter-ministerial forum since the Prague Conference (2001). Consultative members were broadened first at the Berlin conference (2003) with the Unesco European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES) and then at the Bergen conference (2005) with the Education International (EI) Pan-European Structure, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and the Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe (UNICE).

<sup>22</sup> Some important issues raised in the Bologna Process are at least partly outside the direct responsibilities of the Ministers of Education; e.g. financing, the labour market, visa policy for foreigners etc.

<sup>23</sup> The 'open method of coordination' is in a certain way also a working method within the Bologna Process. Therefore, some criticisms of Wim Kok's Report can also be applied here, particularly with regard to the process of the 'Bologna stocktaking' which was executed for the first time at the Bergen conference: »The open method of coordination has fallen far short of expectations. If Member States do not enter the spirit of mutual benchmarking, little or nothing happens. [...] If governments do not show commitment to implementation nationally, this remains a huge problem. [...] The central elements of the open method of coordination – peer pressure and benchmarking – are clear incentives for the Member States to deliver on

discussion. Here it is important to turn to 'the content': to some important issues of contemporary higher education which have been approached and discussed within the Bologna Process and which have already brought the first results, first of all, some 'concerted' proposals on a common structure (a system of easily readable and comparable degrees) and co-operation in quality assurance.

### **Questions of efficiency: trends towards comparable degree systems and common guidelines and standards in quality assurance**

To summarise: there are two main driving forces of the fundamentals of contemporary higher education policies – on one hand the phenomenon of *mass higher education* and *internationalisation of higher education* on the other. Since the 1960s higher education systems have been constantly expanding and internationalising. These trends – in combination with a broader economic and political agenda – have raised the question of the *efficiency of higher education systems* in quantitative (resources etc.) and qualitative (qualifications, academic output etc.) terms. This is the real background which has been dominating national policy developments and pushing them, at a later stage, towards the *processes of international 'concerting'*. There is logic in these trends.

At a certain stage, the increased volume of teaching and research at higher education institutions started to raise *questions of the efficiency of higher educations*. Even in those countries which had been treating the higher education sector relatively generously, the overall political and economic situation in the 1980s started to press towards the lowering of costs and greater efficiency and led to stricter controls on public spending as well as reductions in public spending. Since the volume and quality of higher education provision should not be reduced (but rather increased) measures for reforming *education structures* and *governance* of the system and institutions as well as *quality assessment* have started to appear in national policy directions.

On the other hand, the general context of international economic co-operation and political integrations strengthened the *mobility* of students and graduates as well as teachers and researchers. Further, the enhanced academic mobility started to knock against existing standards and procedures for the *recognition of qualifications*. For mobility to be seriously further strengthened it became necessary for countries to adopt new *supra-national regulations on recognition*<sup>24</sup> and to start *developing more comparable structures* in their education systems. The growing need to develop new structures was also easily understood as a lever of *innovation and productivity* within the international context.<sup>25</sup> Comparable degree structures as a 'formal' lever could have a

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their commitments by measuring and comparing their respective performance and facilitating exchange of best practice» (Kok, 2004, 42).

<sup>24</sup> The drafting and adoption of the *Lisbon Recognition Convention* was already mentioned; by the Bergen Conference »36 of the 45 participating countries« had ratified it (*Bergen communiqué*, 2005). Prior to the Lisbon Convention, the adoption of the European Council Directive 89/48/EEC regarding a general system for the recognition of higher education diplomas awarded on the completion of professional education and training is another landmark of the highest importance in this area but is related to EU Members States only.

major effect of facilitating mobility but not without a 'content' lever: mutual trust in the quality provisions of various national systems and for that reason the need for *quality assurance measures*. Thus, questions of the governance of higher education, particularly the qualifications framework and quality assessment, proved not only to be *key national policy issues* but they entered *supra-national policy discussions* and remain at this level up until today.

**I. Comparable structures.** Let us first focus on the emerging *comparable structures*. It is a notorious fact that European higher education systems are characterised by a high degree of diversity. One possible approach to this diversity is to differentiate between 'short' and 'long' courses. »In 1980, university degree courses in many European countries lasted a minimum of five years and were often highly academic. The lack of intermediate qualifications meant that students who did not complete a course, or pass their final exams, were left without any recognition of their years of study« (Eurydice, 2000, 144-145). At an advanced stage of mass higher education, policy measures aimed at lowering costs and greater outcome *had* to address efficiency, e.g. as the problem of higher education *dropouts*.<sup>26</sup> *In times of mass higher education old education structures became counter-productive*. The splitting up of 'long' courses into successive 'shorter' ones, also supported by successful examples from abroad, the modularisation of courses and more flexible provision for transition between courses appeared as fairly early policy responses to problems that were encountered. Thus, the initial pressure towards a *two-tier structure* (today usually identified as the basis for international comparability) did not come from internationalisation; it was caused by the *problems of establishing mass higher education at the national level*: »Efficiency is a common reason behind the restructuring of degree courses into distinct cycles and the shortening of the time required to obtain a first degree« (Eurydice, 2000, 172).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> In this light, the *Memorandum on Higher Education in EC* already contained some accents and questions which are well-known today: »The [European higher education] systems are characterised by a high degree of diversity. [...] With the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, the mobility of labour and the development of a European labour market, are we beginning to witness the emergence of a 'European' expectation by employers of future employees? As European opportunities become available these will very likely demand a 'European' education, or at least one with a significant 'European' content. [...] The critical question is whether this huge, diverse system can be given a European focus in order to realise Community objectives [...]. Can these systems together establish and maintain supremacy in research, produce the graduates who will have mastered the requirements for managing technological innovation [...]? This is an ambitious, but a necessary prospect« (Commission, 1991, p. 14).

<sup>26</sup> Dropouts are clearly a hot issue in all education systems; however, for systemic, cultural, personal etc. reasons it is very difficult to measure the phenomenon and identify it's the exact numbers involved. »Dropout from specific courses is not necessarily a good measure of non-completion of higher education as students may chose to repeat the year, re-sit their exams or transfer to another course which they subsequently complete successfully. Since few countries, however, are able to monitor students throughout their higher education careers, alternative figures are scarce« (Eurydice, 2000, 120).

<sup>27</sup> »The major reason for change in the structure and content of higher education courses during the period considered was the increase in the number of entrants to higher education« (Eurydice, 2000, p. 133). Several countries in the West introduced shorter first cycle courses with intermediate level of qualifications already in the early 1990s or at least prior to signing the Bologna Declaration. Denmark introduced the so-called 3+2+3 structure dividing university programmes into three cycles (a 3-year bachelor, 2-year candidates and a 3-year doctoral programme) already in 1993. Similarly, shorter courses were introduced in France (1992/93), Finland (1994-97), the Netherlands (1996), Italy (1997) and Germany (1998).

In the majority of European countries, the *trend towards shorter initial university degree courses* giving access to the next level ran parallel to the development of the *non-university sector* with a pronounced *vocational orientation*.<sup>28</sup> With the increase in student numbers two somewhat opposite trends appeared: on one side, a limitation of the number of places in expensive, professional and practically-based university courses as well as their dividing up into successive 'shorter' ones; on the other hand, the expansion of places in new vocationally-oriented courses in the non-university sector as well as their upgrading and lengthening to two- or three-year courses. In formal terms, they »have led to similar first degree structures in both sectors« (Eurydice, 2000, 176) and the question of *transition* from one sector to another arose.

This again implies a question of *comparability* – this time as an 'internal' systemic issue, not as an issue of internationalisation – as well as various questions of '*quality*' (these questions are not necessarily only about the 'genuine quality' of the – in some views 'ossified', 'non-responsive' – university sector). Confronted with new trends,<sup>29</sup> universities have often started to meet the needs of students who consider higher education as preparation for entry to the job market rather than the basis for a traditional academic profession or a research career. Thus, the inherited hierarchy of disciplines has changed and important novelties have also been introduced in learning structures and teaching. The awareness of lifelong learning in higher education, the use of ICT etc. are no less important for the renewal of higher education today than formal structural changes.

Thus, reforms leading *towards the 'internal'* as well as '*external*' *comparability* of higher education systems and *towards diversified but quality higher education provision* were largely recognised as the key policy issues. Higher education has taken on a visible position on general policy agendas. It has also become more and more clear that governments can treat this issue much more effectively if they *work together*; for the sake of effectiveness and considering the issues of global competition in higher education they *have to work together*, hand in hand with the academic community and other stakeholders.

The change to the degree structure or, put better, the »*adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees*« is often understood as the essence of the Bologna

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<sup>28</sup> Some figures on the non-university sector today: »The sector of Tertiary Short Cycle or sub-degree education in Europe represents post-secondary education more than 2,5 million students (1,7 million in TSC and over 800.000 in post-secondary education)« (Kirsh, Beernaert, Nørgaard, 2003, 4).

<sup>29</sup> These trends include developments in the non-university sector and are closely connected with calls for the greater *flexibility* of the tertiary education system: »many countries have made changes aimed at increasing flexibility and choice in higher education courses and at facilitating mobility between study courses and higher education sectors. These have included splitting course programmes into smaller units on a semester term or module basis and the introduction of credits. Such sub-division of courses increases student choice and facilitates inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional movement, including mobility between the non-university and university sectors and between different countries. The pioneers of such changes were the open universities« (Eurydice, 2000, 146).

Process (that is, its 'structural dimension').<sup>30</sup> Yet the Bologna Conference in 1999 put down just a very general idea »of a system essentially based on two main cycles« and added: »The achievement of greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher education nevertheless requires continual momentum in order to be fully accomplished. We need to support it through promoting concrete measures to achieve tangible forward steps« (*Bologna Declaration*, 1999).

Various surveys and monitoring reports have documented many »tangible forward steps«. In 1999, the *Trends I* report could only ascertain that »the survey of existing structures shows the extreme complexity and diversity of curricular and degree structures« and that »no significant convergence towards a 3-5-8 model was found« (Haug, Kirstein, Knudsen, 1999, 7). *Trends II* stated that »in a number of countries the Bologna Declaration clearly seems to have influenced the introduction of a two-tier system« (Haug, Tauch, 2001, 54). Further, »two years later, the reform train is gathering steam and speed almost everywhere in Europe« but it was also realised that »the mere act of introducing a two-tier degree structure can only be a very first step toward a transparent system of degrees« (Reichert, Tauch, 2003, 45). Ministers at the Berlin Conference were pleased to note that »a comprehensive restructuring of higher education is now under way« and encouraged »the [M]ember States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile«. They also undertook »to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area« (*Berlin Communiqué*, 2003).

The idea of a *framework for qualifications of the EHEA* was one of the key points on the 'Bologna agenda' during the 2003-2005 period. A special working group was formed to discuss these issues in detail and to prepare a comprehensive document (*A Framework...*, 2005) to be submitted to Ministers at the Bergen Conference. After noting »with satisfaction that the two-cycle degree system is being implemented on a large scale«<sup>31</sup> this document received clear support from the Ministers: »We adopt the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. We commit ourselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010, and to having started work on this by 2007. We ask the Follow-up Group to report on the implementation and further development of the overarching framework« (*Bergen Communiqué*, 2005).

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<sup>30</sup> In the Bologna Process distinguishing between its 'structural' and 'social dimension' has been recognised to stress the relationship between reforming systemic tools and their social effects as well as preconditions (e.g. values). (See e.g. Zgaga, 2003, 154-167; Zgaga, 2005, 107-115).

<sup>31</sup> This estimation is based on various background surveys. E.g., *Trends IV* stated that »almost all countries have by now introduced the two-cycle system« (Reichert, Tauch, 2005, 11) while the Working Group on Stocktaking was sure that »it is safe to predict that the objectives of this action line [degree system] will be achieved by 2010« (*Bologna Process Stocktaking*, 2005, 42).

*The Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA*<sup>32</sup> systematically and extensively<sup>33</sup> developed the 'structural dimension' of the Bologna Process that was sketched only on a very general level in the *Bologna Declaration*. Several ideas born and developed in discussions over the last decade and before are interrelated and synthesised within it. First of all, 'the overarching structure' as a kind of 'common denominator' is important for making the relationship between different higher education qualifications including the concrete results of national systems in Europe *transparent* (»easy readable« as in the *Bologna Declaration*) and contributes substantially to their *compatibility*. This effect should improve the *recognition* of qualifications achieved in different national or institutional contexts but also encourage *mobility* and ease various problems in this sector. On the basis of the framework for EHEA, the further development of *national frameworks* is foreseen. A national framework is not only important 'externally', that is as an 'interface' between different national systems, but also 'internally': qualifications frameworks strengthen the internal *coherence and logic of each particular national higher education system*. Last but not least: »Qualifications frameworks help provide the basis for confidence [...] within trans- and inter-national context« (*A Framework...*, 2005, 77). They provide a *context for effective quality assurance*.

**II. Quality assurance.** From its very beginning, the Bologna process has also put high on its agenda the »*promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to develop comparable criteria and methodologies*« (*Bologna Declaration*, 1999). The development of this 'action line' has been particularly long and demanding. In some countries, the idea of quality assurance started to spread to higher education from the economy relatively early on, already in the 1970s, and by »1997, all countries participating in this study, except the French Community of Belgium, had introduced some form of nationally (in German at *Land* level) defined quality assessment system« (Eurydice, 2000, 177).

The Eurydice study shows an obvious increase in policy and legislative activities among the reviewed countries at the end of 1980s and in the 1990s; »the major focus of legislation and policy was the management and control of higher education institutions and in particular the financing of such institutions« (Eurydice, 2000, p. 33). Until today,

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<sup>32</sup> A definition: »*Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*: an overarching framework that makes transparent the relationship between European national higher education frameworks of qualifications and the qualifications they contain. It is an articulation mechanism between national frameworks« (*A Framework...*, 2005, 29).

<sup>33</sup> In relation to »a system essentially based on two main cycles« (*Bologna Declaration*, 2005), *A Framework* elaborated cycles in details and proposed »guidelines for the association of credits with qualifications within national frameworks:

- > Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications may typically include [...] by 120 ECTS credits;
- > First cycle qualifications may typically include [...] by 180-240 ECTS credits;
- > Second cycle qualifications may typically include [...] by 90-120 ECTS credits – the minimum requirement should amount to 60 credits at second cycle level;
- > Third cycle qualifications do not necessarily have credits associated with them« (*A Framework...*, 2005, 71-72).

Thus, the early (Sorbonne) idea of a strict 3-5-8 structure acquired much more flexible, developed and feasible features.



these issues have not appeared much in documents adopted by *international* forums: it seems they are 'the core' of the *national* education systems and, as such, they were 'marked' for a long time by the particularities of national discourses.

As mentioned, the economic and political circumstances of the 1970s and 1980s – characterised by pressures to reduce public sources as well as by an expanding tertiary education sector – dictated *questions of effectiveness in education*. Various methods of quality control, quality assessment, quality assurance etc. ('QA methods') were borrowed from the economic sector and gradually transferred to the tertiary education sector in modified forms. It is impossible to overlook that individual countries were introducing QA methods in their respective legislation parallel to changing provisions on management and financing. However, the implementation of QA methods had to respect certain specific features of the academic environment, which clearly differs from the economic sector. One of the most important features is linked to the principle of *academic autonomy* and related to changes in *higher education governance*.<sup>34</sup>

With few exceptions, European higher education systems have traditionally been very influenced by the state. Since the 1980s this role has started to change: the state has been withdrawing from direct institutional governance. The state's influence started to be restricted to setting general higher education objectives – structures and qualifications – that is, to higher education *output* (graduates, their employability etc.) and not to the *process*. As a rule, legislative provisions were redirected from funds allocated to institutions strictly by budget lines (salaries, equipment, maintenance etc.) to the allocation of block grants aiming to increase autonomy for its 'financial dimension'. This is the conceptual turn – a move away from the traditional »*interventionary*« towards the new »*facilitatory* state« (Neave and Van Vught, 1991) – which is the most characteristic feature of the policy and legislative changes of the 1980s and 1990s and still retains some relevance today. Institutions got *more autonomy* but they became *more accountable*: they are bound to the more efficient use of public funds and encouraged to seek alternative sources and to be more open to the economy and society.<sup>35</sup> A special tool for and proof of institutional accountability has been given by *developing and implementing QA methods in higher education*.

A preliminary result of national developments in this area was the *extreme variety of QA provisions* at the beginning of the 1990s; it seems this variety was even larger than in the case of degree structures. Interestingly, the issue of quality assurance was not an item on the agenda of the *Memorandum on Higher Education in the EC* (Commission, 1991).

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<sup>34</sup> Bok admonishes that universities in the modern 'age of commercialization' need changes in governance to strengthen autonomy, not to weaken it: »Unless the system of governance has safeguards and methods of accountability that encourage university officials to act appropriately, the lure of making money will gradually erode the institution's standards and draw it into more and more questionable practices« (Bok, 2005, 185). The *internal quality culture* is particularly important for the issues discussed here.

<sup>35</sup> »The granting of greater autonomy to institutions, particularly in institutional governance, budget spending and course planning was intended to encourage an entrepreneurial spirit and thus promote efficiency, cost-effectiveness, flexibility and quality in educational provision. At the same time, institutions were encouraged to seek additional funding through bids for governmental contracts and the sale of their research and teaching services« (Eurydice, 2000, 177).

However, the spirit of European co-operation in higher education, well supported during this period by EU Member Countries and positively influencing the broader European context as well, sparked discussions among countries even in this area. An early EU document stressing *quality assessment in higher education* was only adopted in late 1991: »Improving the quality of teaching in higher education is a concern shared by each Member State and by every institution of higher education within the European Communities. The increasing importance of the European dimension in general and more particularly the introduction of a single market will widen the range of interested parties concerned with quality in higher education in each Member State.« Encountering the diversity – or absence in some national systems – of methods used for quality assessment at the national level, the document also stated: »It would accordingly be useful for the methods at present used in the Member States for quality assessment in higher education to be investigated in a comparative study« (Conclusions..., 1991).

This was an encouraging confirmation of novelties already introduced in some countries and an incentive for countries which were then still considering QA measures. Two lessons can be learnt here: (1) in an age of mass higher education and its internationalisation *QA standards and procedures are necessary systemic elements* for improving the functioning of the whole system and its connection to other national systems;<sup>36</sup> (2) if there is an *incompatible variety of QA models* across Europe then *they do not contribute to the necessary confidence*. Yet mutual trust is a psychological cornerstone for the success of reforms in all countries aiming at improving higher education through co-operation and open systems.

We again note the logic of the process: the increasing number of students and limited resources launched a debate on the effectiveness of higher education. Sooner or later, this issue was approached on national levels via thorough reforms of financing and management as well as the preparation of new qualifications structures. While financing and management issues could remain to a certain degree 'behind national fences',<sup>37</sup> the changing of qualifications structures (or frameworks) had to involve inter-national 'concerting'. In principle, compatibility can only be achieved if diverse elements are restructured on similar (agreed) grounds. However, the declared compatibility of structures is not enough for trust; there should also be evidence about quality provision based on transparent – now, why not also compatible – quality standards and procedures. *Not only structures* (qualification frameworks) *but also quality standards and procedures*

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<sup>36</sup> This is not only an 'external' demand from society; it is also a demand from the internal nature of the modern university: »The university's reputation for scholarly integrity could well be the most costly casualty of all. A democratic society needs information about important questions that people can rely upon as reasonable objective and impartial. Universities have long been one of the principal sources of expert knowledge and informed opinion [...]. Once the public begins to lose confidence in the objectivity of professors, the consequences extend far beyond the academic community« (Bok, 2005, 117-118).

<sup>37</sup> To a certain degree: so far these issues have not entered one single supra- or inter-national political document – if we ignore statements like »we recognize the need for sustainable funding of institutions« (*Bergen Declaration*, 2005). However, as these issues are in the midst of contemporary discussions on higher education and pushed forward by similar vehicles in all countries, we can observe a spontaneous international trend also in this area, similarly to changes in degree structures in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

*should be 'concerted'.* And this has again been a hot potato: another call for 'harmonisation'.

During the 1980s and partly the 1990s, quality concerns were only sporadically a real theme in international discussions (we leave to one side the countless general claims that »quality is important«, which could often be heard). Nevertheless, at least in Western Europe a growing number of countries already implemented QA systems; however, in an extreme variety of forms. At least inside the EU it became necessary to reflect on these developments and to decide on further steps. Indeed, two steps were taken at the end of the 1990s with important consequences: the new EU *Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education*<sup>38</sup> was adopted (September 1998) and the *European Network of Quality Agencies* (ENQA) was established.<sup>39</sup> These discussions obviously influenced the drafting of the *Bologna Declaration*.<sup>40</sup> Thus, *the issue of quality assurance finally entered the broadest European forum for higher education*.

Similarly to the case of implementing a two-tier degree system, the 'Bologna' surveys and monitoring reports give a good insight into further developments in this area. As one might expect, *Trends I* reports that »more and more countries establish external evaluation or quality assurance bodies or agencies« but »the level and scope of the evaluation procedures vary from country to country« (Haug, Kirstein, Knudsen, 1999, 36).<sup>41</sup> *Trends II* contains a chapter under the eloquent heading »Quality assurance and

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<sup>38</sup> The EU Council recommended that Member States support and, where necessary, establish transparent quality assurance systems, to base systems of quality assurance on some common features, to encourage higher education institutions to take appropriate follow-up measures, to promote co-operation between the authorities responsible for quality assessment or quality assurance in higher education and promote networking etc. Another recommendation was »that the Commission, in close cooperation with the Member States and on the basis of existing programmes and subject to their objectives and normal open and transparent procedures, encourage the cooperation referred to in point I.E between the authorities responsible for quality assessment and quality assurance in higher education, also involving organisations and associations of higher education institutions with a European remit and the necessary experience in quality assessment and quality assurance« (*Council...*, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> »ENQA is a European network to disseminate information, experiences, good practices and new developments in quality assessment and quality assurance in higher education among interested parties: higher education institutions, public authorities and quality assurance agencies. The idea for the network originates from the *European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education*. It was established on the basis of the European Council Recommendation of 24 September 1998, while the *Bologna Declaration* gave it additional momentum one year later. The General Assembly meeting of March 2000 adopted the regulations and action plan; since then, the *Network* has figured prominently in discussions about quality issues in the Bologna context« (Zgaga, 2003, 133). In 2004, ENQA decided to rename itself the *European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education* but it kept the old abbreviation.

<sup>40</sup> See p. 12, (II). The *Sorbonne Declaration* does not mention quality assurance issue. However, it explicitly says: »The international recognition and attractive potential of our systems are directly related to their external and internal readabilities. A system, in which two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, should be recognized for international comparison and equivalence, seems to emerge« (*Sorbonne Declaration*, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> »There seems to be a European-wide general trend towards giving higher education institutions more and more institutional autonomy also in matters related to the organisation of studies and the content of programmes. [...] At the same time the increase in the diversification of institutions and qualifications and growing international competition also in relation to higher education seem to further a need at the level of

accreditation: a need for more convergence« (Haug, Tauch, 2001, 42). *Trends III* links institutional autonomy, quality assurance and accreditation and confirms »the primacy of the concern with quality as a motor of the Bologna reforms« while at the same time it also states that the widespread concern for quality »is also the scene of underground and explicit struggles to redefine the respective roles which public authorities, universities and society should play in defining higher education in future« (Reichert, Tauch, 2003, 73). Progress in the area of quality assurance was obviously not as fast as in the area of compatible degree structures. Various interests have been involved.

Finally, Ministers at the Berlin Conference agreed that by 2005 *national quality assurance systems should include some common elements* and agreed on a tricky formulation in which they called upon the »ENQA through its members, in co-operation with the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005« (*Berlin Communiqué*, 2003). Thus, a demanding task was given for the 2003-2005 period – and it was accomplished on time. The ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB (now called the E4 Group) succeeded in finding a common language for these issues and submitted a proposal on *standards and guidelines for QA in the EHEA* (ENQA, 2005) to the Bergen Ministerial Conference in May 2005.

In Bergen, Ministers noted with pleasure that the homework set in Berlin had been done: »Almost all countries have made provision for a quality assurance system based on the criteria set out in the Berlin Communiqué and with a high degree of cooperation and networking«. For the future – and in setting new homework – the following statement is much more important: »We adopt the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA. We commit ourselves to introducing the proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis, while respecting the commonly accepted guidelines and criteria« (*Bergen Communiqué*, 2005).

The adopted document contains three main elements which cover institutional and system levels as well as the level of the 'control of the controllers': European standards and guidelines (1) for *internal quality assurance* within higher education institutions; (2) for the *external quality assurance* of higher education; and (3) for *external quality assurance agencies*.<sup>42</sup> The E-4 Group stressed these standards and guidelines are not monolithic but aim at broad acceptance and »a general resonance at the national level of most signatory states«: »In the light of [the European] diversity and variety [...] the report sets its face

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the individual institution to improve information and documentation on the quality and standards of the institution and its qualifications« (Haug, Kirstein, Knudsen, 1999, 36).

<sup>42</sup> An overview of the detailed contents: (1) Institutional policy and procedures for QA; approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards; an assessment of students; QA of teaching staff; learning resources and student support; information system; public information. (2) Use of internal QA procedures; development of external QA procedures; criteria for decisions; process fit for purpose; reporting; follow-up procedures; periodic reviews; system-wide analysis. (3) Use of external QA procedures for higher education; official status; activities; resources; mission statement; independence; external QA criteria and processes used by the agencies; accountability procedures (ENQA, 2005).

against a narrow, prescriptive and highly formulated approach to standards. In both the standards and the guidelines, the report prefers the generic principle to the specific requirement. It does this because [...] it will provide a more robust basis for the coming together of the different higher education communities across the EHEA» (ENQA, 2005, 10).

The transition from the 'interventionary' to the 'facilitatory' state was characterised by strengthening the role of institutions: 'autonomy for accountability' could often be heard in those times. The role of institutions has again come to the fore within recent discussions on quality enhancement in higher education: it has become clear that the *primary responsibility for quality should be with higher education institutions*.<sup>43</sup> Thus, *Trends IV* as the latest report on developments in higher education turns its focus away from the fact that »the differences among individual European countries are enormous« to »a clear trend toward more institutional approaches to exploit synergies, economies of scale and spread models of good practice at institutions which do not suffer from low degrees of autonomy« (Reichert, Tauch, 2005, 32).<sup>44</sup> Is it possible that pan-European institutional co-operation can help where the subsidiarity principle sets limits on national states?

### **Conclusion: on the grounds of innovation and productivity**

The overarching framework of qualifications and European standards and guidelines have similar logics and supplement each other. They reflect and synthesise numerous previous discussions; they refer to the logic of the higher education developments of the last decades. They mark an important landmark in the internationalisation of higher education but they should not be treated as completed.<sup>45</sup> The challenges brought by the development of mass higher education in the global environment are huge: to make diverse systems comparable and compatible, to promote mutual trust by creating quality culture while at the same time the diversity of national contexts – as well as subject areas<sup>46</sup> – should be fully respected. This is a demanding agenda but contemporary trends

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<sup>43</sup> In Berlin, the Ministers stressed »that consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework« (*Berlin communiqué*, 2003). The EUA in Graz as well as in the Glasgow Convention contributed importantly to this direction: »Universities stress the link between a systemic quality culture, the scope of autonomy and funding levels, and call on governments to acknowledge that greater autonomy and adequate funding levels are essential to raising the overall quality of Europe's universities« (*Glasgow Declaration*, 2005, point 27).

<sup>44</sup> »The essential aim of the Bologna reforms, namely to create a European Higher Education Area which is predicated on quality and therefore attractive to its members as well as the outside world, can only be achieved if the concern for quality is not reduced to the establishment or optimisation of external quality assurance processes alone, but considers all processes of institutional development« (Reichert, Tauch, 2005, 33).

<sup>45</sup> The ENQA report contains more elements than adopted in Bergen: an idea to produce a European register of QA agencies as well as to establish a European Register Committee (»a gatekeeper for the inclusion of agencies in the register«) and a European Consultative Forum for QA remains unrealised (see ENQA, 2005, 30-33). It raised too many concerns related to subsidiarity.

in all countries persuade us that »different independent national frameworks, which are not linked together in a coherent way, would not fulfil the learners' expectations of a European Higher Education Area of transparency and mobility where qualifications are easily recognised across borders. [...] In order to facilitate fair recognition it is necessary for foreign partners to trust that national qualifications also in practice correspond to the levels to which they are attached. In this context, the quality assurance system, however it is organised nationally, has a role to play« (*A framework...*, 2005, 75).

*Effectiveness* as well as *innovation* and *productivity* are today expected from higher education: for good reasons. However, higher education – responsive and responsible – cannot consider innovation and productivity only as external purposes; higher education (with institutions as the system) should be innovative and productive for itself, internally: searching for a new identity to meet the new challenges. There have been progressive periods and there have been deep crises in the history of European universities. Experience proves that they undertook immense forward steps when they found innovative and productive responses to challenges of the time whereas persisting in the old forms and discourses did not help. We should learn from these lessons. Neither the unlimited commercialisation of higher education and research nor the dignified contempt of academic traditionalism can yield truly innovative and productive answers to the key questions of our time.

An understanding of these questions should not be caught within the circle of opposite complaints like »there are never enough financial resources for higher education institutions« or »dropout levels from higher education are always too high«. Higher education today and tomorrow is not only 'more' or 'less' than yesterday and the day before; if it comes to a turning point between the 'previous' and the 'current' then it is *different*. Therefore, the effectiveness of higher education should not only be understood as a quantitative entity; it is *qualitative*. We should be aware that treating ideas only instrumentally »render sterile the soil of human intellect«;<sup>47</sup> yet, we should not forget that

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<sup>46</sup> It is impossible to discuss in this paper the various issues emerging at the level of specific disciplines, subject areas etc. However, with regard to the compatibility of higher education qualifications and improvements in quality teaching it is necessary to stress the EU-sponsored project *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* (in short: *Tuning*) launched in 2001 and which today encompasses around 150 European universities working together in 'tuning' nine subject areas – from mathematics to history, from education to European studies. For details, see <<http://www.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/index.htm>>. Also see Gonzales, Wagenaar (2003).

<sup>47</sup> Bok reports that »Norbert Weiner, founder of cybernetics, wrote in 1973 that treating ideas as property and introducing the profit motive of patent royalties instead of pure love of discovery would 'render sterile the soil of human intellect'« (Bok, 2005, 140). Bok quotes Norbert Weiner's *Invention: The Care and Feeding of Ideas* (1993), p. 151.

ideas are sterile if they do not provide in their final results for new instruments to help people and society. At this point, real innovation and productivity have always found firm grounds.

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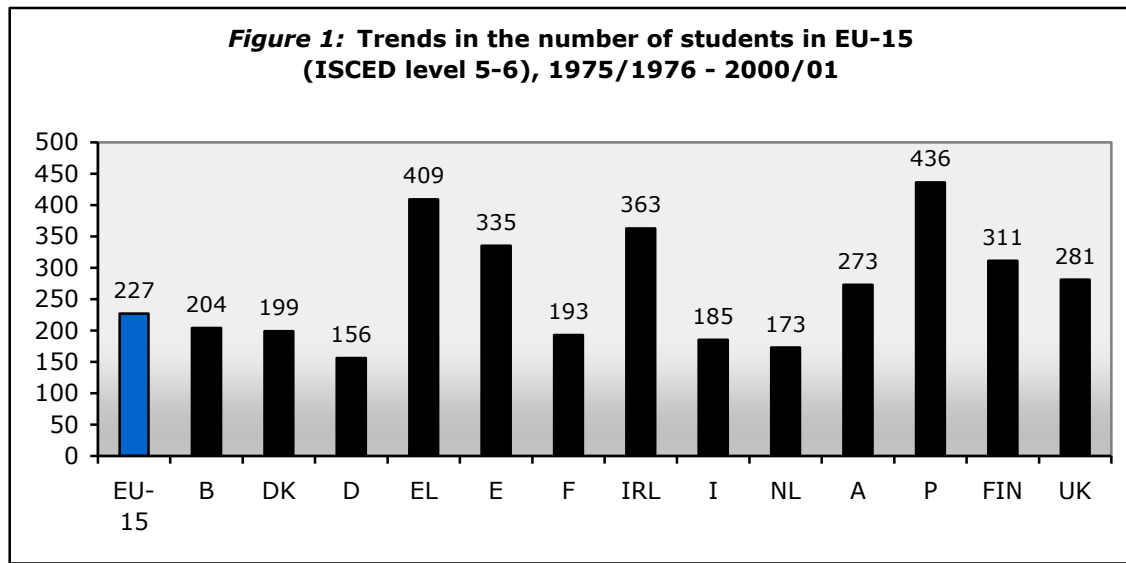


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## Annex

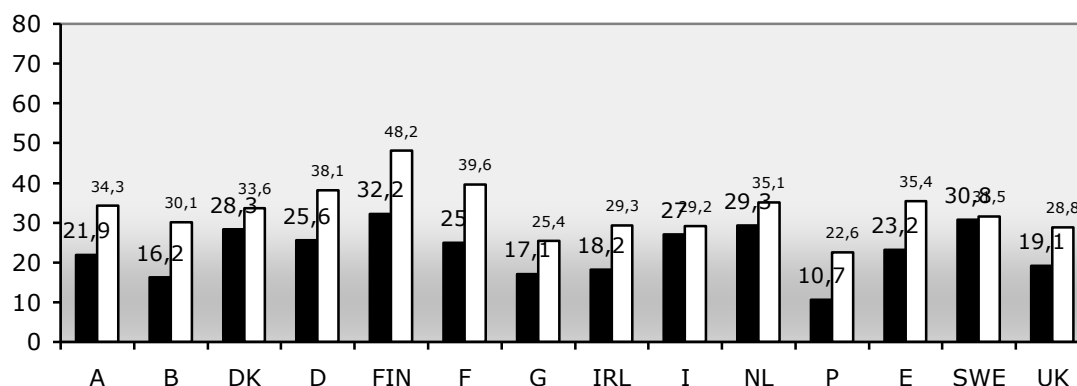


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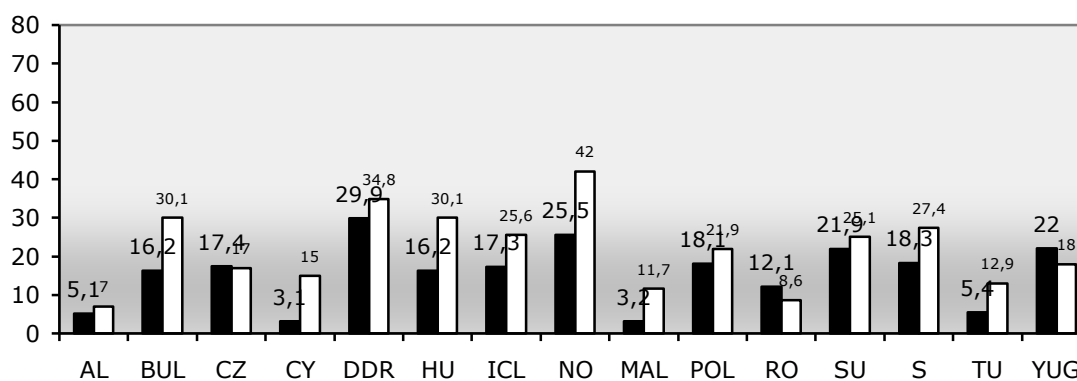
1975/76 = 100 (L, S: data missing).

Source: *Education Across Europe. 2003 Edition*.

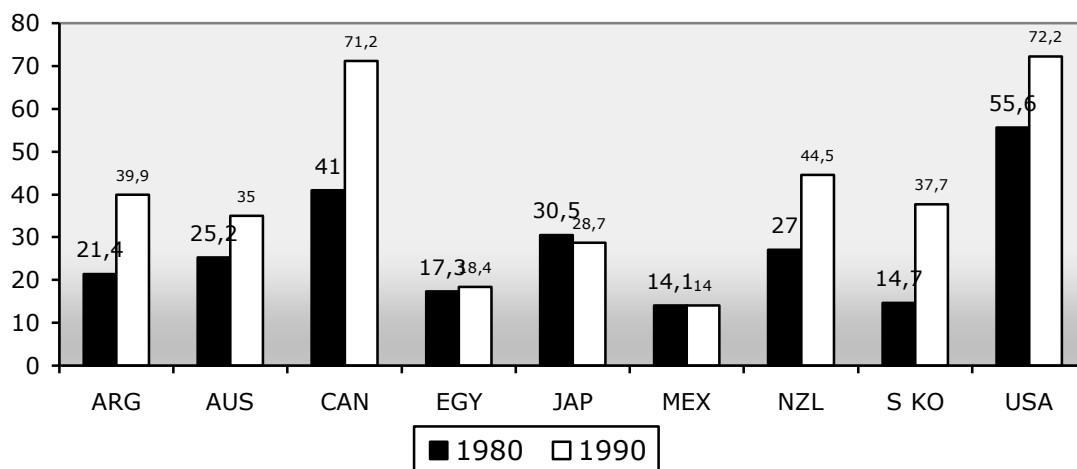
**Figure 2: Trends in third level education:  
gross enrolment ratios (%), 1980 – 1990**



**Figure 2, continuation**



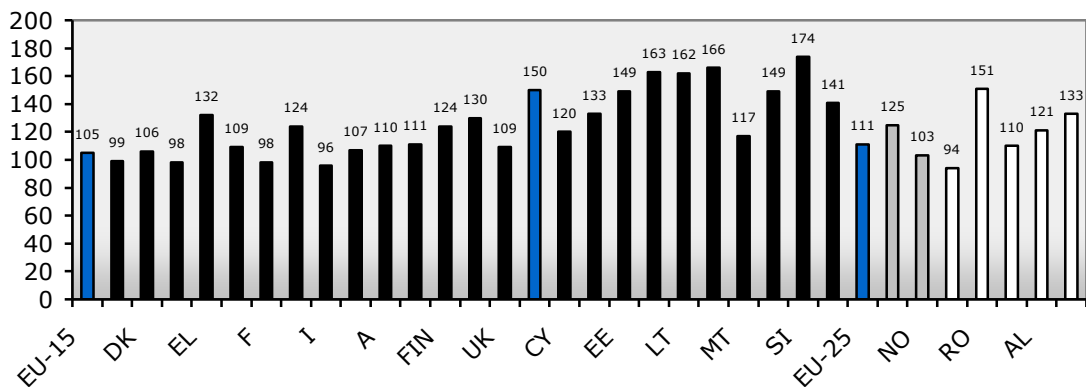
**Figure 2, continuation**



ideas are sterile if they do not provide in their final results for new instruments to help people and society. At this point, real innovation and productivity have always found firm grounds.

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**Figure 3: Trends in the number of students  
(ISCED level 5-6), 1996/97 – 2000/01**



Notes:

1996/97 = 100 (1997/98 PL, 1998/99 MT and TR)

Source: *Education Across Europe. 2003 Edition.*

