



**TRENDS V:
UNIVERSITIES SHAPING THE
EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Trends V

For the first time in the series, this Trends report is based on both quantitative and qualitative research, while previous Trends reports relied on one or other of these two methodologies. Trends V analyses the nature and extent of implementation of the Bologna reforms, and attempts to assess the impact that changes are having on a wider range of institutional development processes. Through comparison with the outcomes of earlier Trends projects, and in particular the Trends III results (2003) that to a large degree addressed the same questions, the report is able to measure the progress that has taken place in implementing higher education reforms. It also points to the challenges that institutions face at a time when they are being asked to respond to multiple societal demands. Bologna can increasingly be seen as a reform of structures that allows a wide range of other institutional development challenges to be addressed.

2. The European Higher Education Area – a shared objective for Universities

Trends V confirms that higher education institutions (universities in the broad sense of the term) are increasingly taking responsibility for the emerging European Higher Education Area. The focus has shifted from governmental actions, including legislation, to implementation of reforms within institutions, with broad support for the underlying idea of more student-centred and problem based learning. This confirms initial findings from Trends IV. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Trends V shows that the general attitude displayed by institutions has also changed considerably in the past four years, with the vast majority of the 908 institutions involved stating that they consider it vital to move rapidly towards a European Higher Education Area.

3. Degree structures

Trends V gives clear evidence of dramatic progress in relation to the implementation of structural reform, with 82% of institutions answering that they have the three cycles in place compared to 53% in 2003. Across Europe, there is no longer any question of whether or not reform of degree structures will take place, but rather a shift to considering whether the conditions and support are adequate to enable the process to be successful. In this respect the national understanding of reforms becomes crucial, and important questions remain with regard to different national interpretations of the nature and purposes of the three cycles, and whether these different national interpretations will prove to be compatible. Trends V identifies, among other substantial issues to be addressed, the articulation between the cycles, admission to the first cycle, the different types of bachelors and masters being developed (for example, academic versus professional qualifications), while also pointing out the particular problems posed by the continued co-existence in some countries of old and new structures.

4. Employability

Trends V suggests that employability is a high priority in the reform of curricula in all cycles. This concern transcends national boundaries and implementation priorities. However, the results also reveal that there is still much to be done to translate this priority into institutional practice. This is a paradox for a reform process inspired, at least in part, by a concern that higher education should be more responsive to the needs of a changing society and labour market. It indicates that one of the main challenges for the future is to strengthen dialogue with employers and other external stakeholders. For many institutions this requires a change in culture that will take time. It is essential that both governments and higher education institutions increase their efforts to communicate to the rest of society the reasons why the reforms are taking place, as a shared responsibility. It is also important for all governments to ensure that their own public sector

employment structures adapt to take account of the new degree structures – an issue pointed out in Trends IV, but not yet entirely resolved.

5. Student centred learning

Although new degree structures are still commonly perceived as the main Bologna goal, there is increasing awareness that the most significant legacy of the process will be a change of educational paradigm across the continent. Institutions are slowly moving away from a system of teacher-driven provision, and towards a student-centred concept of higher education. Thus the reforms are laying the foundations for a system adapted to respond to a growing variety of student needs. Institutions and their staff are still at the early stages of realising the potential of reforms for these purposes. Understanding and integrating the use of a learning outcomes based approach remains a key medium-term challenge. When achieved, it will enable students to become the engaged subjects of their own learning process, and also contribute to improving many issues of progression between cycles, institutions, sectors, the labour market and countries.

6. Bologna tools: ECTS, Diploma Supplement and Qualifications Frameworks

The use of *ECTS as both a credit accumulation and credit transfer system* continues to become more widespread across Europe, with almost 75% of institutions reporting use of ECTS as a transfer system and over 66% as an accumulation system. Yet while a vast majority of institutions are now using ECTS, there remains much work to be done to ensure that they use it correctly. Incorrect or superficial use of ECTS is currently still widespread. Such usage hinders the re-structuring of curricula, and the development of flexible learning paths for students, while also making both mobility and recognition more difficult. Institutions have to take responsibility for driving the development of ECTS in a way which enables them to respond effectively to the challenges of an open and truly European Higher Education Area.

Slightly less than half of Trends V respondents confirmed that they issue a *Diploma Supplement* to all graduating students. This is disappointing – even if a further 38% say that they have plans to use the DS – given the 2003 Berlin Communiqué commitment that all students would be issued a Diploma Supplement free of charge by 2005, and suggests that some national systems are lagging behind. Efforts to promote and publicise the Diploma Supplement also need to be renewed in order to enhance its usefulness to students and employers.

Although following the adoption in Bergen of the *Qualifications Framework* for the European Higher Education Area, qualifications frameworks are a topic of considerable policy debate, Trends V shows that there is much work to be done in informing higher education institutions and involving them in development at national level. Currently institutions – with the exception of those in Ireland – are generally confused as to whether or not their national system has such a qualifications framework, as well as to the purposes that it serves. There is a danger that without proper understanding of the reasons for the development of qualifications frameworks, the result may be that they remain little known in institutions, thus seriously limiting their impact.

7. Student services

Trends V shows a growth in the provision of student services over the last four years. However, the results of the qualitative research undertaken indicate that while it appears that many institutions and systems offer a wide range of services, these may not be sufficiently developed or adapted to the growing needs of a diverse student body. Guidance and counselling services in particular merit greater attention, on the part of both institutions and governments. Professional staffing and adequate resourcing are key challenges, as is the monitoring of the quality of provision. Involving students – as users and beneficiaries – is sound practice and should be seen as a principle for further development.

8. Quality

The focus on quality in the Bologna process has certainly raised awareness within higher education institutions of the potential benefits and challenges of effective quality assurance and enhancement activities. More constructive discussion between institutions, quality assurance agencies, stakeholders and public authorities appears to be taking place, and the involvement of students in quality assurance activities also seems to be gaining ground. Indeed in some parts of Europe, quality assurance seems to be replacing degree structure reform as the main topic of interest in the Bologna process.

The results of the questionnaire (based on the criteria set out in the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) adopted by Ministers in Bergen) demonstrate that much work has been done to develop internal quality processes in institutions; student services, nonetheless, being one area that is still not widely evaluated. However, relatively few institutions seem to take a holistic approach to quality improvement. In this respect Trends V confirms the findings of Trends IV and the EUA quality culture project, that extensive internal quality processes are correlated with a higher degree of institutional autonomy.

External quality assurance systems also need to demonstrate that they actually produce an improvement in quality. Considerable concern still remains about the increasing bureaucratic burden on institutions. Meanwhile institutions need to continue to embed a responsible and responsive quality culture as a means of enhancing creativity and innovation in fulfilling their missions.

9. Mobility

The Trends V questionnaire data indicates that, although there are still major deficits in capturing reliable information on mobility, many institutions have a general perception that student mobility is increasing. It is important, however, to distinguish between different forms of mobility – within countries and between countries, within degree cycles and between degree cycles, and within organised mobility programmes or as “free movers”.

With regard to mobility between countries it seems that “free mover” mobility could be on the increase in some parts of Europe. However, another explanation of institutions’ perception of increased mobility is that greater attention is being given to international student mobility, largely as a result of the additional revenue streams that can be provided through international education. In terms of mobility flows, there is evidence that, as in the past, many central and eastern European institutions are exporting more students and staff than they are importing, while certain western European countries are clearly strong importers.

Mobility flows seem to be closely related to funding policy and socio-economic issues, while the changes in degree structures so far seem to have had only a marginal impact. Indeed, the potential for greater mobility between cycles is not greatly exploited at this stage, and is rarely an element of national or institutional policy. Indeed many national funding systems currently act as a disincentive to mobility, rewarding institutions that retain students, but not providing incentives to mobility.

Recognition of student learning also remains an important challenge, with considerable difficulties still existing in relation to the recognition of learning that has taken place outside a national environment. Because of the importance attached to mobility as an essential characteristic of the European Higher Education Area, an increased effort needs to be made to encourage academics to accept the long established principle of "mutual trust and confidence" in the recognition of learning and qualifications offered by others. Fine tuning in the use of learning agreements is also essential.

10. Lifelong Learning

"Lifelong learning" is a term used, confusingly, to cover both continuing education and training for well-qualified graduates and initial education for disadvantaged groups, possibly through part-time higher education. While many institutions perceive lifelong learning as an emerging priority, Trends V provides little evidence that they have taken strategic action to consider their missions in one or other of these endeavours or to anticipate the challenges ahead. Thus no coherent picture of the understanding and implementation of lifelong learning emerges from the report, although there are indications that this is an area where diversified funding sources exist and where there is considerable scope for cooperation with local partners. Once again, questions arise regarding the recognition of prior learning which need to be addressed. Some institutions suggested that the implementation of Bologna reforms has taken priority over developing lifelong learning strategies, but now consider that the conditions have been created for a more adequate response to be developed.

In relation to access in particular, while almost all institutions consider widening participation to be important, their expectations of being able to contribute to this development are rather low. This demonstrates the importance of government policy in this area and the need for incentives, all the more so given the obligation felt by many institutions to improve competitiveness by attracting the best students; they sometimes falsely believe that this precludes improving the diversity of the student base.

11. New member countries

The Trends V report has looked at the situation of some of the new member Bologna countries separately, discovering as much diversity within and between these countries as across the rest of Europe. The addition of Russia to the Bologna process in 2003 added a vast new territory and enormous number of institutions to the potential European Higher Education Area. While there is a significant vanguard of institutions pushing forward reforms, the Bologna process nevertheless encapsulates both ideological and geographical issues, and it is not yet clear if a unified national strategy to implement reforms will emerge. There remains much to be done to support the work of the reform-minded academic community.

Institutions in South East Europe clearly perceive the Bologna process as providing a direction that is essential for societal development. Among the many challenges being faced, the step to move away from a culture of self-managed faculty independence is still the key issue if reforms are to prove sustainable and effective.

Georgia offers a case study of how the Bologna process can be used effectively to support a profound reform of higher education, with extraordinary change taking place in very little time. A key element to success has been the effort made to provide basic information on European texts in the national language.

12. International attractiveness

The reforms across Europe are also taking place in a context of increasing global interaction. The Trends survey shows that institutions are receptive to developments outside as well as inside Europe, and there is also increasing evidence of institutions in other world regions responding strategically to European developments. The responses of higher education institutions show interestingly and very clearly that as in 2003 inter-European cooperation remains the highest priority. However, relationships with higher education institutions and systems in Asia have become vastly more important in the past four years. There is also some evidence that attention is also focusing more than in the past on cooperation with the Arab world and Africa. It is difficult, however, to evaluate whether these institutional perceptions will prove to be ephemeral or part of a sustained trend. Nevertheless, higher education reforms in Europe are no longer a matter of interest only to Europeans, but also have an impact in the global arena.

13. Future challenges

All of the issues addressed in Trends V have implications for the development of the European Higher Education Area, but three key challenges for the future can be highlighted:

- 1) **Strengthening the relationship between governments, higher education institutions and other societal stakeholders** is essential to anchor and sustain the goals of the Bologna process. One major priority must be to broaden debate with employers, students, parents and other stakeholders, and thus enhance trust and confidence in the quality and relevance of institutional engagement. In addition, institutions and governments need to join forces not only in implementing reforms, but in communicating widely the results and implications of the structural and curricular reforms which are taking place.
- 2) **Institutions need to develop their capacity to respond strategically to the lifelong learning agenda** taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the structural changes and tools that have been developed through the Bologna process. This means that institutions must use these tools correctly, and develop them further to enhance student-centred and flexible learning, as well as greater mobility. Increasing dialogue with employers is again required if university courses, at all levels, are to meet the needs of a society and economy in which knowledge becomes rapidly out-of-date and in which, therefore, constant training and retraining is required. Through addressing these lifelong learning challenges, institutions can also tackle the social objective of ensuring equality of access to higher education for all those qualified and able to benefit from it.
- 3) **Finally, institutions must begin to think through the implications of the existence of the European Higher Education Area after 2010.** Some aspects of Bologna are likely still to require implementation or reconsideration, and it will be particularly important to do this with greater European vision to overcome some of the local and national obstacles that currently prevail. The European Higher Education Area is also being developed in an increasingly inter-connected global context, and its international reception is therefore of the utmost importance. Once again the responsibility lies with governments and institutions to explain reforms, and to support these major cultural processes that have now been set in motion.