

Trends IV: European Universities Implementing Bologna

Executive Summary

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- 1. Trends IV: Universities implementing Bologna:** Trends IV has been undertaken through extensive field research, with 62 site visits to universities (using the broad sense of the term) at the core of information gathering. While the research findings contained in the report are qualitative in nature, and therefore do not provide statistical certainty, Trends IV provides an in-depth and the most up-to-date snapshot of the state of implementation of Bologna reforms in Europe's universities.
- 2. Embracing Reform:** The findings regarding attitudes to reform in universities contrast sharply with the views expressed by institutional leaders only two years ago through the Trends III questionnaires. General acceptance of the need for reforms seems to be widespread in universities. Indeed, many institutions have made great efforts to "internalise" the reform process, incorporating Bologna issues into their own institutional strategies and activities. In many cases, reforms are recognised as an opportunity to address problems which have long been known to exist. The overwhelming perception from the site visits is that actors in institutions are now facing and tackling the challenges of implementation with commitment and energy.
- 3. Coping with Reform:** Criticism of the reforms from within universities tends not to focus on the purpose of reform – there is considerable consensus that change is needed - but rather upon the extent to which reforms are, or are not, being supported. Often implementation is being hindered by lack of the necessary institutional autonomy to make key decisions or the additional financial resources for universities to cope with such a major restructuring exercise and the new tasks which have emerged as part of the reforms. At the same time, the role of leadership within universities is also critical: wherever the leadership is providing strong and positive support to the process, allowing enough space for internal deliberation, progress is smoother.
- 4. The introduction of three cycles:** Considerable progress has been made in introducing three-cycle structures across Europe, although there are still some legislative obstacles to structural reform in a few countries five years after signing the Bologna Declaration. Many institutions, however, have now reached the heart of the transition process. Structural change must be matched with proper redevelopment of the curricula, and often this has not been completed. Confusion sometimes exists regarding the objectives of the first cycle degree (which many mistakenly regard as a compressed version of former long-cycle programmes) and in many cases there has not been adequate time for institutions and academics to address reforms in a comprehensive way and to benefit from the opportunities offered through restructuring the curricula.
- 5. The impact of structural reforms:** All too often, Bologna is still conceived as essentially a process of harmonising degree structures. Trends IV illustrates that, although much progress is being made, the process of moving towards a comprehensible three-cycle system throughout Europe is a highly complex cultural and social transformation that has set off a chain of developments with their own dynamics in different contexts. While changes to the length of studies can be described easily, measuring their significance and their impact requires much greater and more sophisticated analysis: for example, the acceptance of new first-cycle qualifications in society, the extent to which these new qualifications meet the needs of the labour market, and the implications of a pedagogical shift to student-centred learning.

6. Employability of first cycle graduates: In the majority of universities visited concerns were expressed about the employability of first cycle graduates. Indeed, in countries moving away from a long first cycle, many academics are not ready yet to trust fully the new first cycle qualifications, and are frequently advising their students to remain in higher education until the end of the second cycle. On the other hand, institutions in countries where the structural reforms began earlier report far fewer problems of labour market acceptance of first cycle graduates – indicating that countries experiencing difficulties are perhaps simply at an earlier phase of a normal transition. However, significant differences do also exist between the disciplines. The findings also show that more public debate on the reforms is needed and suggest that public authorities are lagging behind in adapting their own career structures to accommodate new first cycle qualifications. Professional bodies – especially in regulated professions – also play an important role. The report includes both examples of areas in which professional bodies encourage new programmes, and others where there are major obstacles. Meanwhile, many institutions themselves are also still not addressing seriously the needs of local, regional, national and international employers when constructing their new study programmes.

7. Enhancing quality: The study's findings show that universities are increasingly aware of the importance of improving the quality of their activities, and this is expressed in a wide range of processes that go far beyond formal and obligatory responses to the requirements of external quality assurance. While the need for improved cooperation between institutions and quality assurance bodies is undisputed, Trends IV points to a range of other factors, including student participation, which have a very direct impact on quality improvement. Notably there is clear evidence that success in improving quality within institutions is directly correlated with the degree of institutional autonomy. Institutions which display the greatest ownership for internal quality processes are also those with the most functional autonomy.

8. Recognition of qualifications: Improved quality is regarded as one of the keys to more automatic recognition of qualifications across Europe. The site visits show that considerable progress in recognition is being made, but again there is a need to do more to ensure a systematic use of the commonly agreed Bologna transparency tools, in particular ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. The Diploma Supplement is certainly being introduced in all the countries visited, in line with the commitment of the Berlin Communiqué, but in addition to technical problems, the challenge of providing clear information about learning outcomes remains. Meanwhile ECTS is being widely used for “student transfer”, and generally seems to work well. However, it is still often perceived as a tool to translate national systems into a European language, rather than as a central feature of curriculum design. Thus strengthening efforts to mainstream these European tools in institutions across Europe continues to be a priority.

9. The link between higher education and research: In relation to their teaching and research missions institutions and individual academics often experience a pull in different directions by the conflicting demands placed upon them. According to many academics, the necessary focus upon re-structuring curricula and the challenges of designing new study programmes and putting in place additional counselling and support for more flexible learner-centered teaching have meant that they have less time than before to devote to their research activities. This is a particular cause for concern in view of the growing awareness at European level of the need to enhance the attractiveness of research careers and underlines the importance of linking the higher education and research agendas. There is so far little evidence that such discourse has been translated into concrete action and prioritised in universities.

Conclusions

10. Trends IV shows that **continuous reform and innovation** is already a reality - and the only serious option - at many universities, and that many factors are combining to affect the nature and success of these complex processes. If reforms are to be successful, there needs to be a much greater awareness throughout society that this current period represents a major cultural shift which is transforming long-accepted notions of higher education and that implementing the reforms in a sustainable way needs **time and support**. Governments must be sensitive to the fact that the goals will not be achieved simply by changing legislation. Institutions need more functional autonomy as a fundamental condition for successful reform and accept that this implies strengthening governance structures, institutional leadership and internal management. The question of the funding of reform has to be addressed and with it the broader issues of investment in higher education as a means of the demands of Europe's developing knowledge societies. After all, Europe's strength derives from the conception of higher education as a public responsibility responding to societal needs, and this requires the commitment to a long-term and sustainable public funding base.