

This article is an edited version of a speech given by Guy Haug at the ACA conference 'The future of the university', held in Vienna, Austria, on 1 and 2 December 2005. The text of the full speech will appear in the course of 2006 in: Kelo, M. and Wächter, B. (eds.), 'The future of the university', ACA Papers on International Cooperation in Education, Bonn: Lemmens. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of ACA.

# Education & Training 2010: are Europe's universities on track?

by Guy Haug

In the wake of the Bologna Declaration and within the Lisbon strategy we have entered a new phase in the development of European higher education: moving from an emphasis on organised mobility towards structural change and policy reforms. This agenda for the modernisation of universities needs to be seen within the European context and in the light of worldwide developments such as the increasingly knowledge-based economy and society and the growing competition that characterises globalisation. The question is whether European higher education is in a position to face these challenges and to accommodate these changes.

## Bigger challenges, stronger competition

The reality is that while universities are crucial for future growth and jobs in Europe, they are not at present in a position to deliver their full potential, and

there are significant performance gaps with respect to their foreign competitors. Contrary to what many in Europe believe, Europe has fallen behind the US and several Asian countries in terms of access to higher education. European universities have also lost ground in research, in particular at the world-class level. Europe's higher education needs to make greater efforts to enhance its attractiveness in the world and re-establish a more balanced flow of exchanges (in terms of quantity as well as disciplines and levels). The main problems are:

- fragmentation in rather small systems and sub-systems
- insulation from market needs
- uniformity within each system
- over-regulation in many countries
- severe under-funding, for both higher education and research

Deep reforms are clearly needed. There are already two, largely coinciding, reform agendas at work shaping the future of European higher education: the Bologna process, and the education and training strand of the EU's Lisbon strategy. Will these deliver the desired results?

## Bologna reforms after Bergen

Bologna is mainly about structural change in degrees and curricula, but has also had a significant impact on the content of courses. Its main merit has been stimulation of curricular renovation, to the extent that the EHEA can be described as a 'zone of curricular work in progress'. At the 2005 meeting in Bergen, a stocktaking of changes achieved or planned halfway down the road to 2010 showed substantial progress in most

countries. But further progress is still needed on all fronts, and the ministers therefore refrained from adding new priorities and focused on concrete measures to achieve the main pillars of the Bologna process.

## Joint priorities of Bologna and Lisbon

Ministers in Bergen took important decisions on quality assurance (QA) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and underlined the importance of making European higher education and European research really attractive to other regions in the world. These three aspects are also key priorities within the EU context.

### • Quality assurance

Ministers in Bergen adopted European standards for three key aspects of QA (internal QA mechanisms within universities; external QA or accreditation; QA agencies), and endorsed the establishment of a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies. In addition, the EU has adopted a Recommendation that not only consolidates similar measures within the EU context, but also defines the Register, requests freedom for universities to choose from all registered agencies and calls upon governments to take into account the conclusions reached by all QA agencies in the Register. Moreover, the Commission supports the establishment of European quality labels in various study fields, and is currently supporting pilot schemes in selected disciplines.

### • European Qualifications Framework

The Commission is working on a European Qualifications Framework

(EQF) based on learning outcomes and competences acquired at different levels and in all segments of education and training. In Bergen, ministers endorsed a concrete proposal for the higher education component of this framework, and the Commission has released a Consultation Document on the overall EQF. Level descriptors will help institutions and learners to find their way, but they should not prevent universities and individuals from making their own original contribution to the creation and gathering of knowledge. The adoption and implementation of a good QA system in combination with a common but flexible EQF will be decisive steps towards establishing the necessary level of compatibility between Europe's diverse education systems, helping citizens to take advantage of this diversity, rather than being constrained by it.

### • Attractiveness

A great merit of Bologna is that it underlined the importance of the external dimension of the EHEA. Measures are already being taken at national and EU levels with a view to re-establishing the attractiveness of Europe's higher education and research in the world. But we must not forget that other knowledge powers are also interested in attracting the best talent from third countries and are offering new schemes, such as the recently announced Lincoln programme in the USA.

## The higher education strand of the Lisbon strategy

The higher education strand of the Lisbon strategy is based on the acknow-

ledgement that higher education is absolutely crucial for the achievement of its goals. In 2002 the Union adopted its first-ever work programme on education and training systems, known as 'Education & Training 2010'. E&T 2010 set a series of European goals concerning quality, access and openness, and requests all countries to adopt policy reforms to achieve these shared goals. Soon after the adoption of E&T 2010, it was acknowledged that the need for reforms was particularly acute in higher education, and this opened the door for a whole new higher education strand within the Lisbon strategy. It calls for the implementation of the curricular reforms launched by the Bologna process, but adds a lot more in the direction of higher education policies.

The main and major document reflecting this is the Commission Communication 'Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon strategy' adopted in April 2005, which emphasises three main directions for change:

- profound curricular renovation
- better system and institutional management
- higher and more efficient funding

The Communication then calls for urgent action, in a mix of university initiative, national enabling and European support. A major priority should be to unleash universities' potential within their national context, while ensuring sufficient total funding and guaranteeing fair access for all qualified students. At a European level, the main priorities should be mobilising all sources of EU funding for the mod-

ernisation of the 'knowledge sector', and investing more in outstanding quality and excellence.

The quest of excellence pervades the whole Communication and also finds its expression in the Bologna process' current emphasis on the doctoral level. Excellence is not restricted to a few institutions, but rather exists or can be developed at a significant number of universities in particular areas of research, innovation, teaching, management, student services, life-long learning, professional retraining, etc. It must be a higher priority to identify, link and support these pockets of excellence, while acknowledging that not all universities can be equally research-intensive and not all should do the same kind of research. This quest for excellence lies at the source of two specific initiatives: the fresh emphasis on doctoral studies and the proposal for a European Institute of Technology.

## Where are we now?

Where are we now in Europe with this urgent agenda for modernisation, or even restructuring, of the higher education sector? In 2005, *The Economist* warned that European universities might not only fail to match their US counterparts, but could be overtaken by Asian ones as well. However, we do not have to share this very pessimistic view. The modernisation process goes on, including, for example:

- the Council Resolution to implement the agenda for change laid down in the Communication;
- fresh impetus from the informal meeting of the European Council in 2005, where universities and R&D are amongst the EU's highest priorities for future action;
- indications that the Structural Funds might be used more for the restructuring of the knowledge sector;
- the new generation of action programmes starting in 2007.

But of course the main responsibility for change and modernisation lies with higher education institutions and the people who work in them. They – you – are the ones who will need take on the challenge and maintain the momentum of reform.



*Guy Haug was until recently policy adviser to the European Commission; the views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily coincide with those of the European Commission*

**European universities might not only fail to match their US counterparts, but could be overtaken by Asian ones as well**