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**“Realising the European Higher Education Area -
Achieving the Goals”**

Conference of European Higher Education Ministers

Contribution of the European Commission

Bergen, 19/20 May 2005

Brussels, 11 May 2005

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1. Introduction

The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for our own citizens and for citizens and scholars from other continents. Reform was needed then and reform is still needed today, because Europe is lagging behind other higher education systems in the world, notably the United States and Asia.

From an EU perspective, the Bologna process fits into the broader Lisbon Strategy, launched in March 2000. In Barcelona, in March 2002, the European Council concluded that the European education and training systems should become a “*world quality reference*”. In Brussels, in March 2005, EU Heads of State and Government re-launched the Lisbon Strategy and they have confirmed the central role of knowledge for growth and employment.

From an EU perspective, there is also an obvious link between the Bologna Process and the Copenhagen Process on enhanced European co-operation in Vocational Education and Training, launched in December 2002. The Commission has taken several initiatives to establish synergies between both processes in important fields such as transparency of qualifications (EUROPASS), Credit Transfer, Quality Assurance and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The Commission supports most of the Bologna Action lines, e.g. through initiatives ranging from the ECTS label (promoting transparency of qualifications), to the “Erasmus Mundus” Programme (fostering the attractiveness of European higher education on a global scale). These measures, which are part of the overall EU approach to educational matters, and the - geographically wider - Bologna process reinforce each other, improving the chances of the genuine implementation of declared objectives across the various higher education systems. Such synergies are illustrated, for instance, by the impact of EU mobility actions on the call for more transparency and recognition of qualifications in Europe. The latter, in its turn, supports the EU’s broader reform agenda under the Lisbon strategy.

This short paper summarises the challenges European Higher Education is faced with and how they could be addressed, linking the Bologna process to the broader Lisbon agenda. The paper describes in brief the contribution of the Commission to the Bologna reforms in the context of a broader ambition of strengthening the role of universities in the Europe of Knowledge¹. It points at the decisive steps Ministers will take in Bergen.

¹ A more detailed overview is provided in the paper “From Berlin to Bergen, the EU contribution” <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/bologna/report05.pdf>

2. The Challenges

Our systems, our universities face bigger challenges and stronger competition than ever before. A quick look at the figures tells us that the situation is alarming. Figures below cover the 25 countries of the EU; but they are representative, at best, for all 45 (potential) Bologna Signatory States.

Tertiary education attainment

While Europe is certainly a highly educated society, only 21% of the EU working-age population has achieved tertiary education, significantly lower than in the US (38%), Canada (43%) or Japan (36%), as well as South Korea (26%).

Access to higher education

While most of Europe sees higher education as a “public good”, tertiary enrolments have been stronger and grown faster in other parts of the world – mainly because families and individuals contribute much more. In the EU, about 52% of the age group is enrolled in higher education. The EU is slightly ahead of Japan (49%) but lags behind Canada (59%) and far behind the US (81%) and South Korea (82%).

Research performance

While the EU educates more graduates in science and technology and produces more PhDs overall, nothing like as many go into research as they would in the US or Japan, we have about 5.5 researchers per 1,000 employees, marginally less than Canada or South Korea, but way below the US (9.0) or Japan (9.7). Two recent surveys emphasising research found that there are only a handful of European universities in the top 50 in the world. The rapid growth of Asian universities, both public and private, is now also challenging Europe – and the US – in terms of doctoral candidates in science and engineering.

In order to change this situation, we need profound reforms; in the Bologna context and beyond.

3. Bologna Reforms – Decisive Steps in Bergen

In Bergen, Ministers are going to take decisions which will be decisive for the architecture of the European Higher Education Area. They concern Quality Assurance and the European Qualifications Framework.

Quality assurance

As regards quality assurance, Ministers will be asked to adopt European Standards both for Universities and for Quality Assurance Agencies as proposed by ENQA and partners. Ministers will also express themselves on the idea of a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies.

The standards will provide the minimum level of compatibility in the form of common references, which are needed in order to achieve the cross-recognition of qualifications and competencies, expected by our citizens and the European labour market. The decisions taken in Bergen will help to achieve that objective. They will also lay the foundation for the

adoption of the EU Recommendation on further cooperation in quality assurance, as proposed by the Commission in October 2004².

Quality assurance and accreditation exercises usually take place at national or regional level. In certain highly international fields of studies, however, transnational evaluations and accreditations can be meaningful. For this reason, the Commission is supporting sector-led projects to establish European Quality Labels in Engineering³ and Chemistry⁴. A few more fields of study might follow these two examples.

European Qualifications Framework

Ministers in Bergen will also adopt a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for Higher Education, and commit themselves to establishing “National Qualifications Frameworks”. These decisions link in with the Commission plans for a “European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong learning”, which, according to the request of the European Council of March 2005, should be adopted by 2006⁵.

The European Qualifications Framework will provide commonly understood reference levels on how to describe learning, from basic skills up to the doctorate, with an ECTS-like credit range attached to each level. In a few years from now, students, institutions, parents and employers in the wider Europe will be talking in terms of learning outcomes – what a graduate can actually do, at the end of his or her degree - and competences. This will certainly facilitate mobility and recognition across a wide variety of learning systems, as well as make our degrees more comprehensible for employers.

In June 2005, the Commission will start a broad consultation on this future scenario for a European Qualifications Framework, open to reactions from stakeholders in the wider Europe. A similar consultation document will be published on a proposal for an integrated Credit System for Lifelong Learning, building on the ECTS experience and preparatory work on credits for vocational education and training but extending it to cover all methods of learning.

Doctoral level

As regards the doctoral level, the Commission will examine how to re-launch the idea of a European Doctorate Label. The label would be awarded to doctoral programmes with a clear European Dimension. The label would raise the profile of these joint endeavours at the crossroads of education and research.

4. Next Steps - Universities and the Lisbon Strategy

Bologna reforms are necessary and they will have the full support of the Commission in the years to come, but in striving for ever-increased quality, institutions and governments must look beyond these structures, and address the underlying questions of attractiveness, governance and funding. They should consider what needs to be done in order to achieve

² COM(2004) 642 final of 12.10.2004

³ EUR-ACE-Accreditation of European Engineering Programmes and Graduates
http://www.feani.org/EUR_ACE/EUR_ACE_Main_Page.htm

⁴ The Chemistry Eurobachelor Label CEBL <http://www.uni-dortmund.de/web/en/index.html>

⁵ Council of the European Union, Presidency Conclusions, 23 March 2005, point 35; ‘The European Council would point to the importance (...) of adopting (...) a European Qualifications framework by 2006’.

world-class quality, to improve governance of institutions and systems, and to increase and diversify higher education funding.

In the Commission's view, Europe needs a new kind of partnership between the State and the University, balancing autonomy, responsibility and self-governance on the one side with strategic guidance from governments; a stable and medium-term funding framework (which should incorporate a creative mix of public and private funding); and real accountability towards society. At the same time, we must ensure equitable access for all qualified students; and this, independently of the funding mix chosen. Sufficient investment in, and sound management of higher education are core determinants of the future of each region and country in Europe and of the future of Europe in the world.

In order to stimulate the debate on these issues, the Commission published in April 2005 a new Communication on "*Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy*".

Moreover, the conclusion of the negotiations on the new Integrated Life Long Learning programme and its envisaged adoption in 2006, should encourage a strong participation of Higher Education Institutions in traditionally successful programmes such as ERASMUS and in new activities aiming to contribute to high level of university studies with strong European and international dimension for a substantial number of graduates.

5. Conclusion

Achieving the goals of the European Higher Education Area requires substantial efforts from governments, institutions, students and staff. Good progress has been made and there is strong commitment at national, regional and institutional level. The European Commission has taken a number of initiatives and is supporting others. It is now for Ministers in Bergen to take decisive steps to bring the process further.