

TRENDS AND ISSUES IN LEARNING STRUCTURES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is meant as a contribution to the follow up work to the Sorbonne Declaration of June 1998 which called for the harmonisation of the architecture of higher education qualification systems in Europe. Its main purposes are to map areas of convergence between these systems in Europe (mainly EU/EEA), to identify trends affecting them and to indicate ways towards greater convergence in the future.

The survey of existing structures shows the extreme complexity and diversity of curricular and degree structures in European countries. The Sorbonne Declaration recommended that studies should be organised in an undergraduate and a graduate cycle, but did not provide an indication of their duration. The debate that followed focussed on the existence (or emergence) of a European "model" with 3 main levels of qualifications requiring 3, 5 or 8 years of study.

No significant convergence towards a 3-5-8 model was found. Whether traditional or newly introduced, bachelor-type degrees last usually between 3 and 4 years, and many European countries without bachelors have first degrees in 4 years; there is however a high degree of convergence towards a duration of about 5 years for master-level studies; but there is no 8-year standard duration for doctoral degrees. In addition, whereas the UK, the US and most countries in the world - except in continental Europe - apply two-tier (undergraduate-postgraduate) systems, the length of studies and the degree structures vary considerably within and between countries, and duration tends to be expressed in academic credits rather than in years.

Several important trends affecting the structure of degrees/qualifications in Europe could be identified. There is a strong and growing governmental push towards shorter studies, first aimed at reducing the real duration of studies to their official length (which is typically exceeded by 2 to 4 years in many countries), and more recently through the introduction of first degrees in countries with traditionally long curricula without an intermediate exit point. Recent reforms in Germany and Austria have introduced new bachelors/masters curricula on a voluntary basis alongside traditional diplomas, whereas in Italy and France existing curricula are being re-arranged in a first and postgraduate cycle. Elements of two-tier systems exist in many other European countries, and it seems that currently only a few countries in the EU/EEA do not have, or are not experimenting with two-tier curricula in at least part of their higher education system.

In countries with a binary system, the line of divide between the university and non-university sectors (and their degree structure) is become increasingly blurred. Most countries have adopted, or are adopting various types of systems for the transfer, and to a lesser extent also the accumulation of academic credits; most are compatible with the ECTS system, which is gaining ground at many institutions. There is a marked trend towards more autonomy of universities, coupled with new initiatives for quality control and evaluation in many countries.

In recent years, European higher education has been faced with mounting challenges from abroad. Transnational education delivered in English by foreign/overseas providers through branch campuses, franchising, or by electronic means has grown rapidly in many European countries; a whole new sector of higher education is emerging alongside traditional, national, state-regulated systems, but until now it has been largely ignored by governments as well as universities in Europe.

Four main avenues of combined action which may foster the desired convergence and transparency in qualification structures in Europe are being suggested.

* The gradual adoption of an ECTS-compatible credit accumulation system. This would enhance the flexibility of national/institutional systems (in particular in view of the development of lifelong learning), bring them more in line with each other and with world systems, and ease mobility both within and from outside the EU/EEA area.

* The adoption of a common, but flexible frame of reference for qualifications. A rigid, uniform model (like the 3-5-8 model) is neither desirable nor feasible in Europe. In line with the analysis of existing systems and reforms in progress, the following broad frame could serve as a common reference, while at the same time allowing for

flexibility and differences in countries and subjects (length of studies are expressed not in years, but as the number of academic credits that need to be successfully completed in order to reach the corresponding level):

- sub-degree level (certificate, diploma):
up to 2 years worth of ECTS credits;
- first degree level (bachelor, honours, other first degree):
no less than 3, no more than 4 years worth of ECTS credits;
- master level: about 5 years worth of ECTS credits, of which at least
12 months worth of master-level credits;
- doctoral level: variable (about 8 years in total).

The main conditions for meaningful first degrees of the bachelor/honours type are being set out. Key factors are the introduction of new curricula (instead of a sheer re-packaging of existing ones), a guaranteed level (gauged on the basis of knowledge and competencies acquired rather than time spent), real possibilities on the market labour, a clear separation from postgraduate studies, and formal accreditation. Short master programmes (12 months) present specific opportunities for intra-European mobility and international competitiveness.

* An enhanced European dimension in quality assurance, evaluation and accreditation:

- compatible quality assurance systems, especially regarding the setting of threshold standards based on learning acquired (outputs) rather than on time spent and curriculum content (inputs);
- independent evaluation leading to European quality labels in broad subject areas; the current vacuum for independent evaluation in Europe would best be filled through agencies independent from national and European authorities, and working along subject lines; they could draw on existing and future European-wide subject-based networks;
- a coordinated approach to quality standards for transnational education, which raises the question of the recognition of foreign private providers.

* Empowering Europeans to use the new learning opportunities. Compatible credit systems, understandable degree structures, increased quality assurance and an more European labour market are structural improvements which would create a whole new range of learning opportunities for all; their impact would be even greater if they were combined with measures such as short master degrees favouring new types of mobility, the further strengthening of the NARIC/ENIC network, counselling with a European dimension, and the elimination of remaining obstacles to student and teacher mobility.

The combined impact of the suggested action lines would also make European higher education more understandable and attractive to students, scholars and employers from other continents; they would enhance European competitiveness and thus help to consolidate (or in the eyes of many, to re-establish) its role and influence in the world.
