

CONVENTION OF EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Conclusions of the work of thematic groups

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The main purpose of the Salamanca Convention was a political one : higher education institutions wanted to formulate in an easily readable way their goals and intentions, the leading principles, major requirements and some of the difficulties that need to be overcome on the way towards the European Higher Education Area.

European universities showed that they want to shape their own future in the new European context. They clearly expressed their will, their intention and their determination to take up the challenge of the Sorbonne/Bologna declaration and to be proactive in the process of building by 2010 the European Higher Education Area.

This short document – also a basis for the *Salamanca Message* to the European Ministers of Education when they meet in Prague on 18-19 May 2001 – sets out the main results of the work of the twelve groups who, during the Convention, debated six key themes taken from the Bologna Declaration of June 1999.

1. Freedom with responsibility: empowering universities

Universities need new freedom if they are to adjust rapidly to "environmental changes" and to new local, national and international partners. The variety of their new tasks calls for freedom of action as the only way towards more efficiency. Universities have to be able to enter into new partnerships, including with commercial partners, and they need to be able to act quickly. This calls for new leadership, the conditions of which depend on the institutions' ability, flexibility and independence to plan strategically.

Universities are not just requesting more freedom, however. They are also willing to accept the corresponding responsibility: they want to be held accountable for what they are doing and for how they use the freedom granted to them.

Thesis 1: Freedom with responsibility

Universities as legal entities need autonomy in, and want to be held accountable for:

- ◆ strategic planning, setting goals and priorities
- ◆ funds allocation
- ◆ selection of partners, locally, nationally and internationally, in research and in teaching
- ◆ selection of research areas
- ◆ definition of curricula
- ◆ management of human capital, in particular the hiring the professors
- ◆ setting of admission rules for students.

Mutual trust between government and universities on a partnership basis is a pre-requisite. Last but not least, nursing intellectual autonomy is still the core task and requirement of academic institutions.

2. Employability in the European labour market

Study programs have to be valid academically and relevant to the labour market at the same time.

Flexibility in curricula and study courses, as well as diversification, respecting different talents and employment prospects are prerequisites. Curricula must meet well defined targets.

The introduction of first cycle programmes is important because of the growing number of students. The articulation of programmes and degrees in two main cycles is a meaningful option if the curriculum takes care of employability (in terms of the competencies acquired) both for students transferring to employment after the first degree and those doing so after the second degree.

Thesis 2

Higher education institutions see the employability of their graduates as an important goal and a necessity. This requires greater programme flexibility and the development of curricular concepts promoting the lifelong employability and adaptability of students. Furthermore it means diversity and multiplicity of entry and exit points in each learning experience.

Thesis 3

Employability in a university context means :

- ◆ a well developed imagination
- ◆ the ability to approach and to solve a problem systematically and methodically applying substantial knowledge
- ◆ the capacity to lead social proces

The overall structure of university programmes and each element thereof must be targeted towards the development of the above mentioned personal skills, while allowing for a great variety of curricular approaches and for competing course designs.

Thesis 4

Institutions of higher education should contribute to transparency and recognition by explaining their curricular approach and the competencies they strive for in a way that is meaningful for students, employers and others concerned. In other words, they should prepare their students to cope with the labour market and their future professional role (preparation for job search and managing one's career). In conjunction with their public and private partners, they should establish career centres for such purposes.

3. Mobility in the European higher education area

Mobility of students and staff promotes the ability to cope with a new cultural and learning environment and to understand other cultures. It is a requirement in view of today's globalisation but it also promotes European coherence and enriches the scientific outlook.

Two types of mobility should be promoted: horizontal mobility (i.e. the student stays with a host university for one or two terms and then returns to complete a degree from his/her home institution) and vertical mobility (i.e. the student finishes a period of study at a first institution and then moves to a second one to continue his/her studies and earn a degree; an ideal point for changing institutions in this way is after the completion of one of the cycles).

Necessary conditions for mobility are:

- ◆ ECTS credits used both for exchange and for accumulation;
- ◆ the Diploma Supplement;
- ◆ a more generous approach to recognition issues;
- ◆ the possibility for both virtual and physical mobility, the former not being a substitute to the latter;
- ◆ the availability of funding for staff and student mobility;
- ◆ transparent quality assurance systems in all countries and subject areas.

Thesis 5

Mobility is a core value of the European Higher Education Area. Existing instruments of recognition should be fully implemented:

- ◆ ECTS (extended to accumulation and life long learning)
- ◆ Lisbon convention
- ◆ Diploma Supplement
- .. NARIC/ENIC network.

Thesis 6

Physical mobility should be promoted as an educational experience and cannot be substituted by virtual mobility. A common European approach to virtual mobility is needed, however. The benefits (i.e. the added value) associated with mobility for staff, students and researchers should be publicised. Administrative and structural barriers and obstacles to mobility must at long last be removed. Countries party to the Bologna process should commit themselves to abolish any law/regulation imposing nationality requirements for holders of permanent and temporary positions at their higher education institutions. Portable grants and loans should be made available to students, together with other suitable incentives to both individuals and institutions.

Thesis 7

The creation and development of the European Higher Education Area depends on the recognition of the essential role of higher education institutions. They are a driving force in the whole process. Their clear internationalisation policy needs to take into consideration:

- ◆ the crucial importance of teaching staff with international experience;
- ◆ realistic language provision (this requires the abolition of any law/regulation prohibiting teaching in a foreign language) and the provision of certain courses in widely spoken foreign languages;
- ◆ the need to offer all students in undergraduate education, regardless of their field of specialisation, the possibility to take a number of credits in foreign languages;
- ◆ good quality, user-friendly information of students concerning international opportunities.

4. Compatibility: a common, but flexible qualification framework

Thesis 8

Higher education needs to be structured in such a way that after 3 - 4 years (or rather 180 - 240 ECTS credits) a student should be eligible for a Bachelor-type degree. This degree should either lead to immediate employment or provide preparation for further studies leading to a Master degree. Under certain circumstances a university may decide to structure a curriculum as a 5-year integrated (i.e. unbroken) programme leading directly to a Master-level degree. Professional and discipline networks have an important role in informing such decisions.

Thesis 9

ECTS should be used by universities not only for credit transfer but also for credit for accumulation :

- ◆ by giving credits for assessed learning gained inside or outside the university;
- ◆ subject to the requirements of regulated professions and the right of universities to decide whether credits gained outside are acceptable or not.

Quality assurance is an essential part of this process.

5. Quality assurance and quality certification

Thesis 10

The internationalisation of quality assurance is a necessary response to the current globalisation trends and to the challenges of building a European Higher Education Area. Accreditation is one answer to these challenges and quality assurance mechanisms are a pre-requisite for good accreditation procedures.

Some kind of European platform or clearing system needs to be organised with the full support of higher education institutions in order to disseminate good practice and advise accrediting bodies on appropriate

procedures. It should foster the mutual acceptance of quality assurance decisions in Europe while preserving national and subject differences and institutional autonomy and not overloading universities. The role of ENQA in this process should be considered.

6. Competitiveness at home and in the world

Competition promotes quality and is therefore good for students. But universities need more operational freedom and a fair financing scheme to enter true competition. More diversity of curricula will further competition. More competitiveness is needed to attract students from overseas. Competitiveness and co-operation are not mutually exclusive. Competitiveness means academic quality in the first place and cannot be reduced to a commercial concept only.

Europe needs to be in a position to attract the best brains from all over the world, but this requires the speedy removal of inadequate immigration and labour market regulations.

Competition raises issues within Europe (East versus West, South versus North) and there is the danger of an inner-European brain drain. Specific measures could be:

- ◆ the introduction of study programmes taught in major world languages;
- ◆ more marketing in non-European countries, developing educational trade marks and brands;
- ◆ the development of adequate services for foreign students and scholars, allowing European higher education institutions to be perceived as welcoming institutions;
- ◆ competition with other continents through strategic networking.

Thesis 11

Higher education institutions are willing to take the responsibility of operating in a competitive education arena, but this requires more real managerial autonomy (going beyond classical academic freedom), a flexible regulatory framework and fair financing.

Thesis 12

Competition serves the quality of education and is good for students, higher education institutions and other stakeholders. It must be accepted and promoted and at the same time underpinned by reliable quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms that are readable inside and outside of Europe.

Thesis 13

Being globally more competitive also calls for more openness, transparency and competition at home. It requires a revision of our service and marketing culture in line with the realities and values of European higher education, such as cultural diversity, research orientation and social responsibility. Universities in certain accession countries are not yet equipped to compete on an equal basis and need special help.

Conclusions

European universities and their organisations are willing and capable to take the lead in the joint effort :

- ◆ to renovate and rejuvenate higher education;
- ◆ to redefine it at a European scale;
- ◆ to promote the employability of their graduates and the mobility of their students and staff;
- ◆ to further the compatibility between institutions and curricula;
- ◆ to assure quality in the European Higher Education Area;
- ◆ to be more competitive, not excluding cooperation;
- ◆ to address the specific difficulties of universities in certain parts of Europe.

Prerequisites are enough freedom and appropriate funding, as well as the removal of immigration and labour market restrictions.

European higher education institutions want to be in a position to shape their future in the European Higher Education Area. If they all want it, their message will be heard and it will happen.