

*Per Nyborg,
Chairman, Committee for Higher Education and Research
Council of Europe*

A Decade of Transition in European Higher Education

The Challenge

With the breakdown of communism in 1989, countries in east and central Europe returned to democracy, experiencing an immediate need to change their systems of governance, defence and economy. Also the education sector, including higher education, was up for great changes.

In higher education, some disciplines needed complete reorientation, such as philosophy, history, economy and social sciences in general. Also, experimental sciences had lagged behind for lack of funding – theoretical natural sciences and “non-ideological” areas like linguistics were much better off.

More fundamentally, an educational policy had to be developed in each of the new democracies, new forms for governance of universities to be set up. Weak national economies made these tasks hard. In many countries changes took a long time. I would even say they are still ongoing. In south east Europe, later political unrest and wars set the process back by many years and the building of stable democracies is still an unfinished process.

Already very early in the process of change, co-operation with countries in the west was developing, between individual scientists, between institutions, between states and through international organisations.

The role of the Council of Europe

Also the Council of Europe was part of this process, and still is. As the membership grew, each year I found my seat in the Committee for Higher Education and Research moved further back in the room as new member countries listed before Norway in the alphabet claimed their seats. Today, the Council of Europe has 44 member countries, in our committee all together 48 countries are represented. Each country is represented on the committee by one member from the ministry of education and one member from the academic community. The academic member is nominated by the National Rectors’ Conference. Thus, our committee is a meeting place for government and academia from all over Europe, from Iceland to Turkey, from Ireland and Portugal to Russia and Armenia. In fact, it is the only pan-European forum of its kind.

In 1992 the Council of Europe committee set up its program to support changes in the east member countries, the Legislative Reform Programme (LRP 1992-2000). The primary aim of the LRP was to provide support to the processes of legislative reform in higher education and research, as part of the consolidation of democratic regimes. This, of course, was an element in an overall process of transition from centrally planned economies to social market economies in the individual countries. A subsidiary aim of LRP was to deepen understanding of the role of legislation in higher education in Europe as a whole.

The LRP shared with other Council of Europe programmes the features of practical support for countries in transition, professional advice by independent experts, and reference to the European standards and best practices. It also had features specific to the higher education sector: it followed a long-standing policy of academic mobility and drew on the experience of a network of bilateral East-West university co-operation developed since the 1970s. In its operation, the LRP drew heavily on the Committee for Higher Education and Research for expertise, feedback and leadership. The strong links of the LRP to the Committee reinforced its character of extended solidarity rather than one-way assistance.

During the lifetime of the LRP, the changing needs of member states led to significant changes in its profile. There was a gradual shift in geographical focus, and therefore thematic priorities, from central to east and southeast Europe. There was a shift from legislation as such to the policy context surrounding it. An increasing involvement of experts from central Europe in missions and workshops indicated that the old differences between east and west in Europe were fading and that co-operation in the university sector could be pan-European.

Early in the process it became apparent that each country in transition had to find its own solution within a common framework of basic principles. For a background, those of us from the west that took part would share our own experiences with those of you that were developing new national systems. This approach respected the diversity of European cultures. As institutional co-operation and student exchange developed, we came to see the cultural and linguistic manifold as strength of our European collaboration.

Student exchange made it imperative to recognise study periods and exams from other countries as equivalent to study periods and exams in the home country, and to recognise foreign degrees as equivalent to degrees obtained at home. Although both the Council of Europe and UNESCO had previously developed conventions to facilitate recognition, a new standard-setting instrument was needed. Together, the Council of Europe and UNESCO developed the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, usually referred to as the Lisbon Convention, as it was agreed at a Ministerial Meeting in Lisbon in 1997. Since then, the Lisbon Convention has been ratified by 30 states and signed by 13 more.

The central message of the Lisbon Convention is the following:

- Each country shall recognise qualifications from other countries as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system unless there are substantial differences.

The Lisbon Convention refers to the Diploma Supplement as one important instrument to simplify recognition. The Diploma Supplement was jointly developed by UNESCO/CEPES, the Council of Europe and the European Commission, thus demonstrating the broad basis we have for European Co-operation in the field of higher education.

It is important to underline that the changes in higher education in Europe during the last decade has been much more than a re-unification of the east and the west. Although universities are considered to be slow in changing their orientations, European higher education has changed a lot in recent years. Part of it is, of course, due to changes in national policies and also European policies. However, much is also due to the need for change seen by the university leadership. Equally important, common understanding and mutual trust has developed between governments and universities in many countries, even though they may disagree for instance on the financial needs of the institutions.

The National Rectors' Conferences

Important contributions both to the policy discussions on European level and to an improved dialogue between governments and the university system have been made by university organisations. In most European countries, there is a National University Rectors' Conference, in a few; the National Rector Conference spans both universities and colleges. Private institutions may or may not take part in the Rectors' Conference, depending on the status of private institutions in the individual country. In most European countries, private institutions are seen as a supplement to a national system of higher education.

The National Rectors' Conferences usually have an ongoing dialogue with the National Ministry of Education. At times, this dialogue may be strained and the mutual trust may be low. However, whenever I have taken part in LRP missions on behalf of the Council of Europe, the Rectors' Conference has always been a partner to our discussions with the Ministry of Education and the Parliamentary Committee for Education.

A dialogue on European level

On the European Arena, the Rector Conferences joined forces in the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences, the main objective of the Confederation being to set up a dialogue with the European Commission. Even though education, including higher education, is the responsibility of the individual member countries of the European Union, the influence of the Commission on higher education through co-operative actions is significant. The Socrates Programme is a prominent example. As higher education in EU member countries should qualify and recruit to a European labour market, the need for mutual recognition of national degrees is obvious.

The Confederation was not the only organisation representing European universities. The Association of European Universities – CRE, with some 500 individual universities as members, shifted its focus in the late nineties from traditional academic discussions relating to university governance, to European co-operation and approached the European Commission much in the same way as the Confederation. The need for European universities to speak with one voice resulted in the merger of the two organisations into the European University Association (EUA) in 2001.

The merger was a direct consequence of the enhanced co-operation between the European university organisations and European governments that manifested itself in the Bologna Declaration of 1999, signed by Ministers of Education from 29 European Countries.

The Bologna Declaration states that a Europe of Knowledge is an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies and an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space.

The importance of education and educational co-operation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is paramount, the more so in view of the situation in south east Europe.

The Bologna Declaration makes it clear that European higher education institutions, for their part, have accepted the challenge and taken up a main role in constructing the European area of higher education, also in the wake of the fundamental principles laid down in the Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988. This is of the highest importance, given that universities' independence and autonomy ensure that higher education and research systems continuously adapt to changing needs, society's demands and advances in scientific knowledge.

I shall not here comment on the follow-up of the Bologna Declaration, the Bologna Process, aiming for a European Higher Education Area by 2010, merely saying that it can only succeed through a continued trust and co-operation between governments and the institutions and organisations in the higher education sector.

Developments during the last decade

The developments since 1990 tell us that a European Higher Education Area will never be a static system, higher education is in continuous development. Let us look back and observe some of the recent changes:

A change from elite higher education to mass higher education has taken place. Up to 50 % of a country's population may now attend higher education, not necessary at university. Life-long learning also include higher education, both for those who missed their first chance and those who need updating after some years' working experience.

This also means, that in most countries, the state cannot afford to pay for the total cost of higher education. In some countries, tuition fees have to be paid. In other countries, such as the Nordic countries, politicians insist that higher education should in general be free for all. (However, special courses for life-long learners may be for paying, even in state institutions.) In many countries in central and east Europe, state institutions may have non-paying and paying students in the same class.

We all believe that higher education should be a public good. However, we may have to look deeper into the meaning of this concept. The basic assumption must be that all citizens should have access to higher education, irrespective of their economic, social, ethnic or religious background, equal rights for men and women. How best to use the money available for public higher education, is being debated.

The aim of the Council of Europe project on access to higher education (1993-96) was to understand the nature and extent of under-representation of less privileged groups and to

identify potential ways improving their participation in higher education. This participation must respect equity, individuals' needs and the prevention of exclusion. Policy recommendations to governments and higher education institutions were adopted in 1998 by the Committee of Ministers.

The Council of Europe project on life-long learning for equity and social cohesion (1997-2001) underlined the role of lifelong learning is one of the key elements of a European knowledge society and as a tool for strengthening all three main functions of higher education:

- personal development,
- preparation for the world of work,
- active participation in democratic society.

Successful implementation of lifelong learning would require rational and consistent funding policies with cost effective use and sharing of resources, partnerships and dialogue between the different stakeholders with clearly defined responsibilities and where the university has a major role to play.

Policy recommendations on life-long learning to governments and higher education institutions were adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2002.

However, life-long learning is a much wider field than traditional university courses. Many different providers including organisations and businesses offer courses for updating or retraining, not only locally, but more and more via Internet. As e-learning is growing, private and also for-profit education has been escalating in many countries in the nineties, especially in the United States.

In a number of countries, the demand for higher education is greater than the capacity of the institutions. In central and east Europe, a partial solution has been to open up for paying students in state institutions. In many countries in Asia and South America with large populations, such as for instance China and Brazil, the demand can not be met by the national institutions. As a consequence, foreign providers have started operations in these countries, either by establishing local units or by providing education via Internet. These new providers may be higher education institutions, or they may be private companies or multinational concerns. These new providers operate for profit. We have to face the situation that education nowadays also is a trade.

The emergence of other providers of higher education than the domestic universities has caused concern in many countries. Especially in developing countries and in countries in transition, governments have felt the need to increase their control over these new providers. National standards, curricula and degree-awarding powers must be protected to safeguard the inclusion of higher education in national objectives for economic development, for protection of the culture and for the further development of a democratic society.

Since 1995, higher education and other forms for tertiary education have been included in the global framework for trade. Under WTO, the World Trade Organisation, negotiations are going on under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and these negotiations also include educational services.

Little is yet known about the consequences of GATS for quality, access, and equity of higher education. There is in the university sector a fear that GATS may influence the national authority to regulate higher education systems, and have unforeseen consequences on public subsidies for higher education. Both EUA and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) have taken a critical stand on trade in educational services.

From the Council of Europe Committee on Higher Education and Research, we have argued that if there is trade in higher education, it can only be as a supplement to national educational systems.

Unless quality can be assured, recognition of education from new providers should be out of the question. Together with UNESCO, the Council of Europe has developed a Code of Good Practice for Transnational Education, which requires that:

- Academic quality and standards of transnational education programmes should be at least comparable to those of the awarding institution as well as to those of the receiving country.

The Code of Good Practice is a subsidiary document to the Lisbon Convention. The Committee for Higher Education and Research insists that the Lisbon Convention and its subsidiary documents must be respected also by the new providers.

Selling services is not unknown to higher education institutions. Commissioned research is a relevant example. The need to engage in contractual work, is one explanation for the rethinking of university governance that has been going on in recent years. A university law that refers all economic decisions to the Ministry of Education, is an effective blocking mechanism for a co-operation between university and industry.

Quality has become a central issue in European Higher Education, partly, but not only, as a consequence of the appearance of new providers. There have been concerns for academic standards against the background of massification in higher education. Budget limitations have led to stagnating or declining government funding per student and a pressure to increase efficiency in public expenditure. Also, there has been a growing public demand for more transparency of the higher education system, including quality. I may add that the higher education sector itself became more competitive with the pressure of private institutions and new providers.

All these factors are in themselves partial descriptions of changes in the higher education sector.

Changes in legislation on higher education

Governments have gradually seen the wisdom of delegating decisions to the institutions. However, deregulation and institutional autonomy assume full accountability. Universities in many European country now receive a lump sum budget from the state, linked with clear objectives but with the freedom to use the money the way the institution consider to be the best for reaching the objectives.

As a consequence, new laws on higher education tends to be less detailed than earlier laws,

being more like a framework for finding solutions than a straitjacket for institutional governance. Also, the concept of an autonomous university tends to include the responsibility of the university leadership for activities carried out by faculties and institutes within the university. Faculties as independent units reporting directly to the ministry, do not fit this picture.

The increased international co-operation clearly is a challenge to university laws in many countries. Joint study programmes have been developed by universities in different countries and such efforts are encouraged in the building of a European higher education area. However, giving a joint degree often turns out to be a stumbling stone. University laws may set the requirement of using only the country's own language or it may design the rector as the single person allowed to sign the degree-awarding document or a lot of other things that will prevent giving a double degree.

My conclusion is that European higher education is rapidly changing. Continued change will be a necessity if a European Area of Higher Education shall be more than a Ministerial Declaration. The challenge is not for universities and higher education systems in the east to copy western solutions of the nineties, but to for everybody to work together - government and universities, to develop national educational systems that truly respect each other across Europe and that can achieve more together from synergies than each individual system can possibly do at its own.