

Progress towards the European Higher Education Area: What Trends reports are telling us...

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Each of the three Conferences of European Ministers of Education that has contributed to the construction of a European Higher Education Area by 2010 has been informed by a report of trends in European higher education. The first report, *Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education (Trends I)*, prepared for the now famous 1999 meeting in Bologna that launched the process, was instrumental in setting the objectives outlined in the Bologna Declaration. *Trends II* (2001) presented in Prague in 2001, played a major role in broadening the geographic and thematic scope of the Bologna Process. It concentrated principally on an analysis of national structures, as did Trends 1, while the third and most recent report EUA prepared for Berlin "*Trends 2003: progress towards the European Higher Education Area*", reflected for the first time the views of higher education institutions and their students. For this reason it has done much to raise awareness of issues now at the forefront of many current national higher education debates such as: how best to implement the reforms? Are they supported by the key stakeholders? How does one national situation compare to another? What is really happening inside our universities? To what extent is the elusive "European Dimension" really the guiding force behind national reform processes?

Trends III – an EUA bestseller

Of the three reports, there is no doubt that Trends III has been the most widely read among the higher education community. The report, written by Sybille Reichert and Christian Tauch for the EUA, has become an overnight success, with copies being requested each week from institutions as far afield as Vladivostok in north-east Russia to Faro in south-west Portugal. Five months after the Berlin Conference, there is no sign of a slow-down in demand.

One explanation of such high interest is its clear focus on higher education institutions themselves rather than on national structures. Trends III deliberately canvassed and compared the views of different higher education actors and stakeholders (National Ministries, Rectors' Conferences, students, employers and most importantly over 800 individual higher education institutions) on the same Bologna issues.

"Around 45% of higher education institutions in 40 countries responded to the Trends III questionnaire, which is an astounding result for a European survey, and a clear indication that higher education institutions are ready and willing to play their role in Europe very responsibly" commented Eric Froment, President of the EUA.

Bologna Process implementation– some food for thought

For unconditional enthusiasts of the Bologna Process, however, Trends III does not always make comfortable reading. The nature of the reform process – with each country moving in its own way towards a common, but somewhat elusive, goal – has understandably sometimes generated confusion and thrown up contradictions. In terms of core reforms, such as the introduction of a two-cycle degree system, debate and discussion on the direction of reform, of course, reflects the diversity of national systems, culture and traditions. Hence reforms which are intended to improve transparency by using common terminology may sometimes inadvertently muddy the picture. For example, while some countries have decided to introduce a first-cycle bachelor qualification to be awarded after 180 ECTS credits (three years), others have opted for new first-level bachelor qualification awarded after 240 ECTS credits (four years). And if first-level qualifications are differently understood, what does this imply for second-level qualifications?

In addition this impacts on mobility issues. Is it possible to encourage more vertical mobility (i.e. from one institution to another between first and second level studies – studying a masters in a different

country from where the bachelors was completed) if the length of first and second study cycles are different? How much room for diversity of curriculum contents is feasible within first or second level degree programmes if institutions are trying to encourage mobility within the course of a study programme?

Such questions are just a tiny sample of the issues being discussed within and across institutions as Bologna reforms “progress”.

Trends III also highlighted some interesting paradoxes. While the Bologna Process is often simplistically and mistakenly portrayed as moving European higher education systems closer to Anglo-Saxon traditions, responses to Trends III questionnaires indicate that the UK higher education community is the least aware or involved of the forty countries. Tish Bourke, Manager of Europe Unit for Universities UK, responded:

"Trends III has reinforced the need for UK engagement in the Bologna Process. We hope that by increasing awareness of European issues, the UK HE Europe Unit will bring about greater institutional understanding of the EHEA reforms. The publication of Trends IV will hopefully find the UK higher education sector contributing to the debate by providing examples of good practice and by generally playing a more involved role"

Stocktaking: new concept for Trends IV

In Berlin, the European education ministers decided that a process of monitoring and evaluation of reforms is essential, and that the results of this exercise should inform their next conference in Bergen, in May 2005. This so-called “stocktaking exercise” is yet to be fully defined, but EUA will contribute by following up the Trends III report with a new concept for Trends IV. The intention is not to repeat the Trends III exercise, but to aim for a different kind of report, as Lesley Wilson, Secretary General of EUA explains:

“Trends III has really involved higher education institutions, and has shown that the Bologna Process cannot achieve its goals unless the Declarations of Ministers are translated into concrete action which is developed and implemented within higher education institutions. However, there would be little point in repeating the Trends III data collection so soon after the report has been published, as the data from 2002/3 still remains relevant and valid. EUA’s task now is to go more deeply into universities and to find out what is really happening from the point of view of all the stakeholders and actors – students, academic and administrative staff, as well as institutional leaders. While Trends III gave us the impressions of institutions, with Trends IV we want to test the reality of these reform processes on the ground.”

Trends IV: an in-depth look at Bologna reforms

EUA will be drawing upon the support of both Rectors Conferences and individual higher education institutions to produce the Trends IV report. At national level Rectors Conferences will be able to provide the latest information on the key “intermediate priorities” of the Bologna Process agreed in Berlin, i.e. reforms in degree structures, recognition processes and defining the European dimension of quality assurance.

National Rectors Conferences will also play a key role in selecting a sample of higher education institutions to take part in a comparative research project on the implementation of Bologna reforms. The intention is to undertake a series of institutional site visits, looking in-depth at a range of institutions endeavouring to reform their policies, structures and practices to play a leading role in the European higher education area. The research aim will be to understand the problems being faced by different actors in universities, and to assess where improvements need to be made - whether at institutional, national or European level.

Trends IV will certainly not be the only report providing information to Ministers in Bergen. Governmental representatives in the Bologna process are also very keen to undertake their own stocktaking exercise, assessing the progress that has been made in their countries and the tasks

which remain. This news should be welcomed as a sign of commitment and responsibility to the Bologna Process. Yet, without a strong focus on institutions, such an exercise could be superficial.

The Trends IV project has been conceived in the belief that is impossible to assess the impact and effectiveness of higher education reforms without looking in detail at the institutions where reforms must take root. As Lesley Wilson explains:

“We are aware that any methodology in a Europe-wide stocktaking exercise has its limits, and Trends IV will consciously offer qualitative rather than quantitative information. The report won’t tell us what everyone is thinking about Bologna reforms, but it should provide some comparable views from institutions in all forty Bologna countries.”

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