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The role of Europe in higher education policy: expansion across borders and levels

The best symbol for the main and best-known achievements of EU action in the area of higher education is probably the celebration of the one millionth ERASMUS student in October 2002. But although the exchange of students between EU member states, and later on also with associated countries in Central and Eastern Europe, has been the flagship activity, it has certainly not been the only EU action in this area. In fact, in the last five years, a considerable extension of policy application has been undertaken. From an initial focus on mobility and networking at the individual level, a next step was made to enhance co-operation at curriculum level and policy-development at institutional level. More recently, initiatives are being taken to develop common agendas for action at the system level. This last phase is of particular importance for policy development at national level. Although nation states have not transferred more formal competencies to the supranational (EU) level, intergovernmental action is increasing in a bottom-up fashion (e.g. the Bologna process). At the same time, the European Commission is becoming more and more integrated into this process and European-level policy processes can be expected to have a growing impact on decision making at national level. This article presents a short historical overview of Europe's role in higher education policy and discusses in particular the most recent changes in this area.

Closed national systems

The European Economic Community, after its foundation in the 1950s, initially addressed educational matters only in the area of vocational training and the transition from education to work, including the professional recognition of qualifications (Neave, 1984). Vocational training was, however, not considered as a priority policy issue. One of the first Council Decisions (1963) was only followed up with general guidelines in 1971 (De Wit & Verhoeven, 2001). It was also in 1971 that the education ministers of the EC gathered for the first time. In 1976 they decided to set up an information network, as the basis for a better understanding of educational policies and structures in the

then nine-nation European Community and established an Action Programme in the Field of Education (Brouwer, 1996; Wächter *et al.*, 1999; De Wit & Verhoeven, 2001). The information network was formalised in 1980 by the establishment of Eurydice.

When higher education became part of the European agenda in the 1970s, the main objective was to encourage co-operation. Objectives were to enhance contacts between higher education institutions, to promote student mobility, and to improve the possibilities for academic recognition (Brouwer, 1996). It was already in this period that the first programme for student mobility and co-operation was launched. The Joint Study Programmes (JSP), predecessors of the ERASMUS programme, were established in 1976 and remained in operation for about a decade.

The choice of mobility and co-operation was not necessarily the most obvious one. Other options were explored, such as the idea to standardise higher education curricula in order to facilitate the recognition of qualifications. These efforts were not very successful, however, because views between different European countries were too divergent, and most governments objected to a move towards the 'harmonisation' of higher education systems. A consensus was reached that European activities in higher education could only be undertaken under the condition that the variety of national systems was strictly respected (Teichler, 1998).

The traditional pattern of the 1970s consisted thus of closed national education systems, regulated and funded by the states. This reflected the principle that the particular character of education systems in the member states should be fully respected, while co-ordinated interaction between education, training and employment systems should be improved. It was also a period during which Europe was the world's main destination for study abroad.

Mobility within constant structures

In the mid-1980s interest in educational co-operation increased. This took place in the context of the European Commission (EC) policies towards the completion of the single market by 1992 and the development of 'European citizenship'. The legal basis for Community action in the area of vocational training was extended (Brouwer, 1996; De Wit & Verhoeven, 2001). A second generation of mobility programmes was launched: COMETT, a programme for co-operation between higher education and industry in the field of technology in 1986 and ERASMUS in 1987, followed by a range of other programmes, such as DELTA, PETRA and LINGUA (Wächter *et al.*, 1999; De Wit & Verhoeven, 2001). ERASMUS funded the mobility of students and staff, the creation of university networks in all fields of study, as well as measures to promote and support recognition of study abroad periods (ECTS). It became the EC's flagship programme. In its first year (1987/1988) some 3,200 students were exchanged. In the year 2000/2001 this had increased to 111,100. At present more than a million students have studied abroad under the auspices of the ERASMUS programme (EC, 2002a).

The new EC programmes were in many cases also a boost for the development of national policies for internationalisation in the various member states. These policies were in the first instance also mainly focused on the mobility and exchange of individuals (Kälvermark & Van der Wende, 1997). The national structures between which the individuals moved, however, were as such not in question. The subsidiarity principle and the sovereignty of member states with respect to their educational systems formed at the same time the legitimisation and the limitation for EC action in this area. Both are laid down in the Maastricht Treaty in the articles 126 and 127 concerning education and training. They clearly state that the EC will encourage co-operation between member states and will only support and complement policy action at the national level, while fully respecting their responsibility for the content of education, the structure of their education systems, and their cultural and linguistic diversity (Maastricht Treaty, 1992).

It cannot be denied that there have always been certain tensions between intergovernmental and supranational or Community-level decision-making, and between action at the national and the Community level (Brouwer, 1996, p. 32). Neither can it be denied that the EU programmes, developed by a supranational body, based on incentive funding from a supranational source, had a direct impact on traditionally nation-based institutions (De Wit & Verhoeven, 2001, p. 193). It can also be argued that the support for student mobility was an indirect means of achieving curricular change, based on a strategy of networking. According to this view, the instrument of student mobility was chosen because it was the only legitimate way of inducing curricular change while respecting the variety of higher education systems and the control of national governments over them. In this way, mobility and the creation of European networks at departmental level, would over time weaken the national powers of curricular co-ordination and could thus eventually de-nationalise curricula. This view, however, cannot be confirmed clearly, because the Commission could not pursue such a policy overtly (Teichler, 1998).

The Commission, with a view to the completion of the internal market by 1992 and the fact that higher education did not really keep pace with that process of integration, launched a debate on higher education in 1991 and published a Memorandum on Higher Education. This Memorandum demonstrated that, in the Commission's view, higher education had become part of a broader agenda of economic and social coherence of the Community. Comments from the higher education community objected in particular to the economic rationale. Still, the concrete issues laid down in the Memorandum did not go beyond the traditional areas of EU action: facilitating mobility, co-operation, the role of languages, and the recognition of qualifications.

As shown above, the period between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s was characterised by a strong focus on European integration (completion of the single market) and consequently on intra-European mobility, mainly triggered by the launch of the major EC programmes. It is important to note that, during this period of intensified intra-European mobility, the picture for extra-European mobility was less successful; Europe lost its position as the world's number one destination for study abroad to the USA.

Increasing the range and level of action and the number of countries involved

From 1995 on, the ERASMUS programme continued in a next phase as part of a broader 'umbrella' programme for general and higher education called SOCRATES (which was implemented from the academic year 1997/1998). Although the fundable activities remained virtually unchanged compared to the previous programme, some important new accents were introduced (Wächter *et al*, 1999).

- First, a stronger focus was put on the development of European (internationalised) curricula. It was assumed that the curriculum was an adequate level for more in-depth academic co-operation, that European (or internationalised) curricula would better accommodate the joint learning of students from different national backgrounds, and that such curricula would also offer a European dimension to students who do not study abroad.

- A second reform related to management practice. Instead of contracts with individual co-ordinators of co-operation projects (sometimes up to 100 per institution), the Commission introduced the Institutional Contract, in which each participating higher education institution submits only one single institutional application, resulting in a single contract including the totality of its EU-funded activities in the area of education. The idea was not only launched to enhance efficiency, but also to encourage institutions to develop an institutional strategy on European co-operation. European co-operation was to be institutionalised. In line with this idea institutions had to submit a European policy statement to outline their main aims and objectives in European co-operation.

- Third, a growing range of countries, in particular in Central and Eastern Europe, were included in the programme.

The step towards co-operation at the curriculum level proved to be an interesting but a difficult one. The development of curricula at initial or intermediate level, or new degree programmes at advanced level, seemed to be best embedded in the institutional strategies. The development of such curricula seemed to be indeed an academically challenging activity well beyond the organisation of student mobility. Many European, innovative, and interdisciplinary approaches were developed. However, the actual institutionalisation of these new programmes (or their acceptance as a new part of the regular curriculum) turned out to be quite difficult. Especially the acceptance of new degrees (usually bachelor's and master's degrees) was hindered by great barriers related to national system characteristics (Klemperer & Van der Wende, 2002). At the same time, these problems raised further awareness of the need for more convergence of higher education systems.

The new focus on strategic development at institutional level did not immediately bring the expected shift from departmental to institutional-level decision-making or from incremental decision-making to targeted strategies (Barblan *et al.*, 1998). In fact, it succeeded best in institutions that wanted to move in that direction anyway, which was the case for only a small minority (Barblan *et al.*, 2000). In general, there was some re-allo-

cation and specific institutionalisation of the international and SOCRATES-related activities, although at a moderate pace. An increase in institutional committees, central-level decision-making and specific administrative units was observed (Lanzendorf & Teichler, 2002). But on the whole, SOCRATES did not have the snowball effect which would lead to a new stage of co-operation within higher education in Europe (Barblan *et al.*, 2000). This state of affairs was observed at a point in time when many institutions of higher education were directing more and more of their attention to globalisation processes that faced them with the challenges of competition. This emerging notion of competition formed for various participants another argument for curricular changes towards compatibility with world-wide patterns of degree structures, i.e. the bachelor's and master's degrees, and in fact evoked the so-called Sorbonne and Bologna processes initiated by national governments in Europe.

With respect to the national level, it was stated before that the launch of the EU programmes in the 1980s was a boost for the development of national policies for internationalisation. Yet the impact of the new ERASMUS programme under SOCRATES on national level policies has not been very remarkable. When the first round of the programme was evaluated in 2000, it was found that indeed most countries had a national policy for internationalisation and that the ERASMUS programme was generally found to be complementary to these policies. The national policies focused in general on quality enhancement, the development of a European dimension in higher education, and of an internationally competitive higher education sector (Caillé *et al.*, 2002). The last element refers again to the growing notion of international competition related to globalisation. At the national level, ERASMUS was in principle seen as helpful for higher education institutions to face the challenges of globalisation.

Summarising the above demonstrates that the second half of the 1990s was characterised by two different trends. On the one hand, the EU programmes that by and large continued their focus on intra-European mobility, while at the same time extending the number of countries involved in the programmes and trying to achieve more impact at curriculum and institutional level (with limited success). On the other hand, a new reality in higher education emerged. The rapidly growing demand for higher education, especially in transition countries, was increasingly met by the cross-border (or transnational) supply of educational programmes and services. A global market for higher education evolved with a pattern of some countries exporting higher education with others importing it. This market was estimated to have an annual value of several billions of dollars and the expectations for growth were among other things spurred by the great hopes (and fears) of ict applications in this area. This trend introduced the notion of international competition and enhanced the economic rationale of internationalisation agendas and activities (Van der Wende, 2001a, 2001b). In Europe, it was the UK that first developed an explicit higher education export and trade perspective, with clear objectives regarding the recruitment of international fee-paying students (Elliot, 1998, p. 32). Later on, other countries also geared their internationalisation policies more towards economic benefits and the aim to make their higher education sectors internationally more competitive.

The concurrence of these two trends implied that European higher education institutions had to consider their internationalisation strategies in the light of two contrasting paradigms — that of the traditional (and mainly European) co-operation and that of the new international (or even global) competition (Van der Wende, 2001a); furthermore, they had to examine their role and position as European universities in the wider international scene more explicitly (CRE, 1999).

At national and European level the effect of the increasing international competition led to a growing awareness of the need to strengthen the position of European higher education. The fact that Europe had lost its position as the world's number one destination for study abroad to the USA, that the USA proved to be the main player (exporting nation) on the global higher education market, and had gained not only direct economic but also substantial human resources and R&D benefits from the inflow of foreign students, were the main factors that fuelled this process. This awareness of increasing competition formed one of the main arguments for the initiative for curricular changes towards compatibility with world-wide patterns of degree structures, i.e. the development of one European higher education area. These initiatives were presented in the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations.

CONVERGENCE TOWARDS SHARED GOALS

The Bologna Declaration and process

The first initiative towards more convergence between higher education systems was taken by four European countries (Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom) in 1998, when they called in the Sorbonne Declaration upon other European countries to join them in an effort to harmonise the architecture of the higher education systems in Europe. The response to this request came already in 1999 when 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration in which they jointly expressed their aim to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010. The need behind this initiative to respond to global challenges and international competition becomes clear in the introductory text of the declaration that states: "We must look with special attention at the objective to increase the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education. The vitality and efficiency of any civilisation is measured in fact by the attraction that its cultural system exerts on other countries. We need to ensure that the European system of higher education acquires in the world a degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions" (Bologna Declaration, 1999, p. 2.). The Bologna Declaration states further that in order to establish the European area of higher education and for the promotion of the European system of higher education throughout the world, the following objectives will have to be attained:
• Adoption of a system of degrees easily readable and comparable in order to promote European citizens' employability and the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education.
• Adoption of a system based on two cycles, the first, of three years at least, that may

be spent on the European labour market and in the higher education system as an adequate level of qualification.
- Establishment of a system of credits – developing the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) – acquired also in non-higher education contexts, provided they are recognised by the university system, as a proper means to favour the widest and most diffused student mobility.
- Elimination of remaining obstacles to the effective exercise of the rights to free mobility and equal treatment.

The Bologna Declaration is taken as a key document that marks a turning point in the development of European higher education. It should be emphasised that the Bologna Declaration and following process was a commitment freely taken by each signatory country to reform its own higher education system in order to create overall convergence at European level. It is not a reform imposed upon national governments or higher education institutions. The Bologna Declaration aims at creating convergence and, thus, is not a path towards the standardisation or harmonisation of European higher education. The fundamental principles of diversity and autonomy are respected. The Declaration reflects a search for common European solutions to common European problems (CERC, CRE, 1999).

Clearly, the reluctance to embrace standardisation and harmonisation and the necessity to respect national sovereignty and autonomy are still present. Yet the pressure coming from globalisation and international competition was the lever for initiative at political level. Besides this external pressure, the experiences from more than two decades of networking have played a role as well (as expected earlier, see section 2.3). The problems concerning different curricular structures and the consequent obstacles for recognition convinced participants at all levels of the need to take the next step on the pathway of European higher education policy. The fact that the Bologna Declaration was, and could only be, a joint but free commitment taken by national governments (i.e. bottom-up and not legally binding) can be understood from the limited competencies of the European Commission in the area of higher education policy. The role of the European Commission as observer in the process was thus limited at first, but gradually enlarged during the following process.

The Bologna Declaration led to a wide range of actions at national level in the various signatory countries. With varying scope and pace, governments undertook initiatives towards achieving the objectives of the Bologna Declaration through interaction with higher education personnel and stakeholders. They focused in particular on the reform of degree systems (i.e. the introduction of the bachelor-master system) and the expansion of ECTS (Haug & Tauch, 2001). The first milestone in the process was the Ministers' meeting in Prague in 2001. It confirmed that the key points of this process are:
- *Simplifying the patchwork of higher education qualifications*
  Ministers called upon existing organisations and networks such as NARIC and ENIC to promote simple, efficient and fair recognition.
- *Improving mobility within Europe and attracting students from around the world*
  Ministers confirmed their commitment to pursue the removal of all obstacles to

mobility and agreed on the importance of enhancing the attractiveness of European higher education to students from Europe and other parts of the world.

- *Ensuring high standards*
  Ministers called upon the universities and other higher education institutions, natio-nal agencies and the European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in co-operation with corresponding bodies from countries that are not members of ENQA, to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference and to disseminate best practice.
- *Lifelong learning*
  Lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. Ministers called on higher education institutions and students to be involved in sha-ping a compatible and efficient, yet diversified and adaptable European Higher Edu-cation Area.

This agenda emphasised some new aspects of the Declaration, in particular, the role of quality assurance in ensuring high quality standards and in facilitating the comparabili-ty of qualifications throughout Europe. This gave a boost to the recently established (2000) European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). They also encouraged closer co-operation between recognition and quality assurance networks and agencies (i.e. between ENQA and the NARIC/ENICs). A new follow-up meeting in the Bologna process will take place in the second half of 2003 in Berlin to review pro-gress and to set directions and priorities for the next stages.

The involvement of the European Commission in the process is not limited to its mem-bership of the follow-up group. It actively (financially) supports various activities that are being considered as part of the Bologna process. This concerns in particular projects in the area of quality assurance, the shaping of educational structures and the develop-ment of (especially joint) master degrees (EC, 2003a, 2003b; Tauch & Rauhvargers, 2002). In fact a growing concurrence of the Bologna agenda and the agenda of the European Commission can be observed.

We can conclude that, with the Bologna process, a greater impact of European-level policy on the curriculum and system level is being achieved and that it is enhancing the international dimension in national higher education policies (Van der Wende, 2001b). Although the term harmonisation is still unacceptable, national governments adopted the need for convergence of higher education systems and for shared goals in their poli-cies. At the same time, and despite the active involvement of the EC in the process, the role of the EU level has remained formally unchanged. The current EU Treaty (Amster-dam, 1999) states once more that: "At European level, education in general and higher education in particular are not subjects of a common European policy: competence for the content and the organisation of studies remains at national level". According to Article 149, the Community's role is still limited to "contributing to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States". Some (main-ly legal experts) criticise that the aim of convergence could not formally be adopted by the EC and that as a consequence a parallel process occurred. In their view, the fact that

the Bologna process is executed outside the formal EU context implies that there is a potential risk of a loss of coherence with other Community actions. Furthermore, the lack of legally binding measures implies that there are no actual means of co-ordinating the implementation at national level, that individuals cannot derive any formal rights from the process, and finally that there is a lack of democratic control over the process (Verbruggen, 2002).

New concepts, shifting agendas
As discussed above, the concept of globalisation gained its place in the higher education debate since the second half of the 1990s. It is clear that globalisation cannot simply be seen as a higher form of internationalisation (Scott, 1998). Internationalisation refers to the increasing interconnectedness of national education systems without the boundaries between them or the authority of national governments over these systems being brought into question. In contrast, globalisation refers to the increasing integration of flows and processes over and through boundaries and does challenge the role of national governments. Furthermore, globalisation is perceived as an external process upon which individual participants and institutions can exercise little influence and it is also associated with competition. Internationalisation is seen more as a malleable policy process and is associated with co-operation. Internationalisation is therefore often seen as a response to globalisation in terms of co-operation for enhanced competitiveness (Van der Wende, 2002).

With these two concepts, different policy agendas on higher education also emerged: on the one hand, the European agenda, focusing mostly on (intra-European) co-operation; on the other hand, an international agenda of liberalisation of international higher education markets, competition and trade, expedited by the opening of a new round of negotiations regarding the Global Agreement on Trade in Services (including higher education services) by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In this context, the question can be asked whether the agenda of (mainly intra) European co-operation (including the Bologna process) will indeed be an adequate European response to the wider challenges of globalisation. The latter not only refers more to competition, but is also pushing higher education as a tradable commodity, challenging the concept of higher education as a public good. The Bologna Declaration and also the Prague Communiqué emphasise the co-operation concept and public good arguments exclusively. In that way, they deny to a large extent that competition in higher education also exists within and between European countries and that certain countries have deliberately introduced market mechanisms and competition in higher education as part of new steering concepts (Van Vught *et al.*, 2002).

But competition was clearly there. European universities were increasingly exposed to it and becoming more and more aware of it. It was recognised from within the academic community that competition – long established in Canada and the USA – was gaining ground in much of Europe. It was also acknowledged that higher education was indeed a global enterprise, and that the fundamental challenges, especially those created by the new environment of technology, globalisation, and competition are very much the

same across nations and continents (Green *et al.*, 2002). The European Commission was also aware of this and looked for a more coherent response to globalisation. In a commissioned report it was recommended that in order to face the challenges of globalisation, the European Union should further enhance internal co-operation, especially geared towards creating more convergence and transparency (i.e. the Bologna process). Also, it should open up towards other countries and regions and forcefully market and communicate the quality of its education to the outside world (Reichert & Wächter, 2000).

The recommendation of opening up to the world was linked to the notion that Europe had lost its number one position as a destination of study abroad in the world and led to the creation of a major new EU programme, ERASMUS World, which will be discussed below. In the meantime, competition as a notion and an argument for action in the field of education has entered firmly into the discourse of the European Commission. In a recent interview the Commissioner for Education and Culture stated that: "Competition between universities is a healthy thing. If our European universities, and I do not only mean those that are world-renowned, but the bulk of them, do not raise the quality of what they offer, then the race – that is already on – with universities arriving from the United States and other continents will be lost" (Forum, 2002).

ERASMUS World
In 2001, the Commission published a report (EC, 2001a) that set out some first steps in responding to new challenges regarding global competition in the education field. It explicitly referred to the market-oriented approaches to internationalisation of the UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands, and to the fact that the USA hosts the majority of foreign students in the world. It concluded that the Community should ensure that its education activities include the international dimension in a more systematic way, and that is should give greater visibility to its action in the field in order to promote Europe as a centre of excellence and to attract students seeking an international education. This document formed the basis for the establishment of the ERASMUS World programme in 2002.

The ERASMUS World scheme is intended to strengthen international links in higher education, by enabling students and visiting scholars from around the world to engage in postgraduate study at European universities, as well as by encouraging the mobility of European students and scholars. The basic features of the programme include a global scholarship scheme for third country nationals, linked to the creation of 'European Union Masters Courses' at European universities. These postgraduate courses would involve study at several higher education institutions in different member states and be distinguished by their European label. The programme foresees the creation of around 90 inter-university networks to provide 250 EU Masters Courses by 2008. Partnerships between EU Masters Courses and third country institutions would also be encouraged. Like the Fulbright Programme in the USA, it will help to strengthen intercultural dialogue and communicate European cultures and values more effectively to the rest of the world. The planned budget for the ERASMUS World project is 200 million Euros for the

period 2004-2008. By supporting the international mobility of scholars and students (1,000 and 4,200, respectively, are envisaged over the life of the programme), ERAS-MUS World intends to prepare participants from the European Union and its partner countries for life in a global, knowledge-based society (EC, 2003c).

The Lisbon summit and the open method of co-ordination
The challenges related to globalisation and the knowledge-driven economy were in the broader political context also acknowledged by the Heads of States or Government of the EU countries (European Council) at their meeting in Lisbon in March 2000. They agreed on the following strategic target for 2010: "To become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (EC, 2002b). In the view of the Council, these changes required not only a radical transformation of the European economy, but also the modernisation of social welfare and education systems. Therefore it called on the Education Council (the education ministers of the EU) and the European Commission to undertake a general reflection on the concrete objectives of education systems, focusing on common concerns while respecting national diversity. At the same time, the Council defined a new approach to political co-ordination applicable in areas such as education and training — the 'open method of co-ordination' — that has as its main purpose the achievement of greater convergence towards the main EU goals by helping member states to progressively develop their own policies towards them. This provided both the initial impetus and the political means for the preparation and adoption in 2002 of a detailed work programme on the future objectives of education and training systems (EC, 2001b).

This new direction made clear that education was seen as a key factor in achieving European success. The Barcelona European Council (March 2002) underlined this by pointing out that education was one of the bases of the European social model and that Europe's education systems should become a 'world quality reference' by 2010. It also demonstrated that the Commission was enlarging its field of operation and policy implementation in education. It openly states now that in addition to areas where Articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty define the European competencies and in which the EU programmes such as SOCRATES are being implemented, it also undertakes action in the context of the EU on the basis of political co-operation between member states. This is not based on EU directives but takes the form of recommendations, communications from the Commission, consultations, or other working documents. This form of political co-operation has grown in education and training (e.g. lifelong learning and e-learning) in recent years and has been boosted by the Lisbon summit (EC, 2002b).

The open method of co-ordination is seen by the Commission as a new instrument which will hopefully pave the way for coherent policies in areas such as education where a 'common policy' is not feasible but where there is a real need for a 'European educational area'. While respecting the breakdown of responsibilities envisaged in the treaties, this method provides a new co-operation framework for the member states with a view to convergence of national policies and the attainment of certain objectives shared by everyone. It is based essentially on:

- identifying and defining jointly the objectives to be attained;
- commonly-defined yardsticks (statistics, indicators) enabling member states to know where they stand and to assess progress towards the objectives set;
- comparative co-operation tools to stimulate innovation, the quality and relevance of teaching and training programmes (dissemination of best practices, pilot projects, etc).

This method of common objectives, translated into national action plans, and implemented through consultative follow-up and peer review (pressure) shows overlapping characteristics with the Bologna process.

The new work programme on the future objectives of education and training systems is based on the following strategic goals:
- improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU;
- facilitating the access of all to education and training programmes;
- opening up education and training systems to the wider world.

These three goals are worked out in thirteen specific objectives (see EC, 2001b, 2002b, 2003d).

The Commission has recently proposed five European benchmarks for education and training, which will help to measure progress and support the exchange of best practices to reach the Lisbon target. Benchmarks relevant for higher education are that, by 2010:
- All member states will have at least halved the level of gender imbalance among graduates in mathematics, science and technology, whilst securing an overall significant increase on the total number of graduates compared to 2000.
- Member states should ensure that the average percentage of 25-29 year-olds in the EU with at least upper secondary education reaches 80% or more.
- The EU average level of participation in lifelong learning should be at least 15% of the adult working age population (25-64) and in no country should it be lower than 10%.

On February 6, the Education Council held a policy debate on the adoption of these benchmarks. The vast majority of delegations agreed on the initial selection of benchmarks. The German delegation expressed some concerns with the benchmarking concept, i.e. that no specific criteria could be adopted that would effectively start to harmonise national education policies. The Education Council is expected to adopt its conclusions on benchmarks at its session in early May 2003 and then will submit these to the Spring European Council in 2004 (Euractiv, 2003).

It is too early to assess the effects of this new method; but the recent developments in European higher education policy demonstrate that convergence (no harmonisation!) and shared goals have been accepted by all actors. Furthermore, despite its unchanged limited competencies, the role of the EU in this field is being enlarged. This, however, is not accepted by all participants. In particular, the European Parliament contests the lack of democratic control over the open co-ordination method; others point to its weakness

in terms of the absence of legally-binding instruments with respect to implementation at national level, as is also the case in the Bologna process (Verbruggen, 2002).

Consultation on new initiatives
The Commission recently launched a large-scale public consultation on the development of new European programmes in education, training, and youth, which will replace the existing SOCRATES, TEMPUS, LEONARDO and YOUTH programmes when they end in 2006.

Besides this, and based on Council's call for European systems of education to become a 'world reference' by 2010, the Commission opened in February 2003 a consultation on the role of universities in a knowledge economy (EC, 2003e), designed to launch a debate with stakeholders on key issues for higher education. The consultation is especially concerned with the funding of higher education. The Commission stresses that the growing under-funding of European universities jeopardises their capacity to attract and keep the best talent, and to strengthen the excellence of their research and teaching activities. A number of areas that need reflection and action are identified:
• how to achieve adequate and sustainable incomes for universities, and to ensure that funds are spent most efficiently;
• how to ensure autonomy and professionalism in academic as well as managerial affairs;
• how to concentrate enough resources on excellence, and create the conditions within which universities can attain and develop excellence;
• how to make universities contribute better to local and regional needs and strategies;
• how to foster the European higher education area;
• how to foster the European Research Area.
The results of the debate will be submitted to the Conference of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education taking place in Berlin in September 2003.

EU and GATS
In 1995, education was included into the WTO's Global Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). However, individual countries have made very different commitments to the various categories of education that are being distinguished. In fact, education is one of the sectors for which WTO members are the least inclined to schedule liberalisation commitments. At present, only 38 countries (including the EU) have made commitments for at least one education sub-sector. Sub-sectors are primary, secondary, higher, adult and other education. Member countries have in general put slightly more limitations on trade in primary and secondary education than on higher and adult education (Sauvé, 2002; see also: http:www.wto.org). With the aim of reducing trade barriers and to gain better access to foreign educational markets, a number of countries (the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Japan) have put forward new proposals for the next round of negotiations on GATS, which will be concluded in 2005. Traditional higher education institutions are most aware of the fact that cross-border trade in educational services may endanger their position and market monopoly. Their representative bodies are therefore opposed to the further liberalisation of the higher education market and the role of the

WTO in this process. National governments are mostly concerned that further liberalisation may undermine their authority in the field and the existing arrangements for public funding of higher education institutions (and their students). However, certain countries also see the opportunities coming from international competition and an open higher education market. As the European Commission will negotiate with other WTO member countries on behalf of all EU member states, it started a round of consultations with member states by mid-2002. This process revealed that most member states take the position that the commitments already given by the Community are quite sufficient. Some would like to explore the scope for withdrawing from existing commitments, as they fear for the demise of the public service character of existing education systems. There is general uncertainty about how the GATS rules for the exemption of public services apply or could apply in the future to an evolving and increasingly heterogeneous education sector, in which private operators increasingly coexist alongside public institutions and the latter institutions themselves operate in some respects on a basis analogous to private providers. The final position of the EC has not yet been made public, but it seems that no further concessions will be offered from the EC side, and that the USA will be asked to take commitments on privately funded higher education, i.e. to broadly match the EU level of commitments (EC, 2003f).

Education and the European Convention
The preparation of the expansion of the European Union with ten new Member States in Central and Eastern Europe by 2004 coincides with a process of redefining the role of the various European institutions. A Presidium has been established to draft a future EU Constitution. Anticipating its consequences in the area of higher education, the European universities have underlined their fundamental role as autonomous institutions in building Europe and in developing the European social model (EUA, 2003). From the first drafts of the Constitution it seems that the subsidiarity principle will remain unchanged (Article 10), and that the competencies of the Union in the area of education will remain limited to co-ordination, complementary or supporting action (Article 15). Article 16, however, introduces a 'flexibility clause' allowing the Union to take action where no provisions are foreseen in the Treaty. The article has been carefully worded and action needs approval of the European Parliament and needs to be in line with subsidiarity rules. Paragraph Three of this article also clearly states: "Provisions adopted on the basis of this Article may not entail harmonisation of Member States" laws or regulations in cases where the Constitution excludes such harmonisation. It could be that this article would provide a legal basis for current practices, such as the open co-ordination method.

CONCLUSIONS

In the area of European-level higher education policy, we have seen a development of an initial focus on student and staff mobility (first for a small number of countries, but gradually expanding to include other countries) towards a more integrated approach to internationalisation (e.g. the development of European Policy Statements). In the

1990s, the dimension of 'competitiveness' was introduced in the internationalisation debate, co-evolving with the developments regarding the Bologna Declaration. As a consequence, new activities (ERASMUS World) were developed and implemented. In terms of legal arrangements, the national governments have always been reluctant to transfer powers regarding higher education to the European level, despite gradual changes over time. The arrangement of the 'open method of co-ordination' may prove to be an adequate mechanism to overcome the nations' hesitancy. In the coming period we will learn how this process will work out, whether political support will grow and/or whether a further legal basis will be created for European-level higher education policy.

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