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Position Paper

The Coimbra Group and European Higher Education after Bologna 2010

Coimbra Group Executive Board

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Executive Summary

The Coimbra Group Universities have enthusiastically embraced the Bologna Process, as they appreciated the added value of increased transnational transparency. With the present position paper they point towards a number of critical issues that need follow-up in the years to come.

They recommend a shift in attention from structures to contents, and encourage the Ministers of Education to take concrete measures to ensure that the degrees within the Bologna structure are based on internationally comparable learning outcomes. Alternative learning paths have to lead to certificates with titles that differ from those of the standard Bologna degrees.

Moreover they recommend that more transparency is introduced in institutional diversity, genuine support to mobility and permanent attention to the societal role of universities. They are confident that internationally attractive and competitive universities will emerge from the present process, ready to face the challenges of a globalising world.

The Coimbra Group and European Higher Education after Bologna 2010

At their 2008 Annual Conference the Coimbra Group Rectors reflected on the European higher education landscape in view of the upcoming 2010 deadline for the Bologna Process. All agreed that the balance of the Bologna Process so far is positive with the creation of a common transparent three-cycle structure, credit transfer system, diploma supplement and quality assurance system. Rectors of Coimbra Group Universities warned, however, against an attitude of satisfaction at a time when many major challenges are still lying ahead for Europe's higher education institutions. This position paper outlines their concerns about a number of these challenges.

1. From a common framework to comparable levels

Increased transparency in the European higher education systems without imposing uniformity is the major challenge for the Bologna signatories. The common three-cycle structure and the ECTS credits are the technical answer to the need for transparency. The Dublin descriptors and the European Qualification Framework, presently in its implementation process in individual countries, are the answer to the need for comparable levels within this framework, leaving room for a wealth of diversity in study programmes.

Learning outcomes have become one of the basic building blocks of the Bologna Process to promote student-centred outcomes-based learning, although a major effort has yet to be done in defining them in an appropriate manner. The topic of learning outcomes has become one of the foremost challenges to universities, with their focus on the achievements of the learner rather than the intentions of the teacher. As such learning outcomes are at the heart of a paradigm change impacting on all sectors of European education. What seems to be forgotten in the competitive struggle or 'academic arms race' is that learning outcomes used to be at the heart of the "universitas" concept, not the class room teaching to which many higher education institutions have turned in desperation over exploding student numbers in the last decades of the 20th century. The attention needs to be shifted from the purely structural issues to concentrate on the in-depth details of learning outcomes, which are in turn linked to the contents of a given subject area. Flexibility and transparency are not guaranteed by mere structural measures or by broad descriptions of study programmes. Quality is not guaranteed by assessments of structural changes or by short curriculum presentations.

From the start of the Bologna Process the idea of "learning paths" has been the predominant element in discussions about the development of study programmes. The concepts of *standard learning path* (i.e. the three Bologna cycles) and *alternative learning path*, able to include other educational offers which exist in the higher education institutions, have emerged. National Qualification Frameworks are being developed, in which rules are stated and examples of good practice given, in order to provide transparency, coherence and compatibility at European level to both standard and alternative learning paths.

With a heterogeneous student body and with a rapidly changing labour market, the learning paths chosen by the individual student have become as important as fixed course programmes. The flexibility needed in a higher education system (the "architecture") pre-supposes the ability of the higher education institutions to deal with individual student counselling within the framework of diverse educational systems.

With respect to contents the Coimbra Group Universities see a number of reasons for concern especially regarding master and doctoral levels:

- **There are masters and masters...**

While the requirements for a master degree are well described and education institutions claim to adhere to these in setting up their master programmes, which are subsequently accredited by appropriate agencies, experience shows that the present variation in master levels and nature across Europe passes beyond the "same level but different orientation" principle. A plethora of master programmes

appears to be emerging: professional masters, scientific masters, short masters, integrated masters, advanced masters, academic masters, even undergraduate masters... Serious doubts can be raised whether several of the existing master programmes genuinely provide the level of knowledge and skills required by the European Qualification Framework, i.e. distinctly more advanced than the bachelor level and leading to the ability to develop original ideas, to participate in independent research, to function independently in complex professional situations.

Exactly the same master title can be obtained in one institution after a study programme of 60 ECTS credits, while in another institution, sometimes even in the same country, twice the study load is required, and in a third case the same title can be obtained by subscribing to an accredited distance learning programme without ever entering a higher education institution. Master thesis work is found to vary from active participation in scientific research to a simple literature study. While the Dublin descriptors stipulate that master qualifications imply the capacity to enter doctoral studies, in practice some master degrees are indeed considered a sufficient prerequisite for doctoral studies while others, with – on paper - virtually the same title and intended learning outcomes, are not. Among those one typically finds the professional master programmes that exist in some countries and short specialisation master programmes offered at different locations. Several higher education institutions apparently use the principle that every post-bachelor programme has to lead to a master degree.

This is certainly no plea to limit diversity and to standardise master curricula. Coimbra Group Universities are strong supporters of diversity in study programmes. There is a clear need, however, for transparency in this diversity and for quality assessment based on achieved learning outcomes rather than intended ones. In asking for this, the Coimbra Group Universities are not in favour of creating more bureaucratic evaluation processes, on the contrary. They suggest that:

- the forthcoming National Qualification Frameworks clearly differentiate standard three-cycle education from other learning provisions, which do not lead by themselves to one of the three-cycles' degrees, but which – being “self-consistent educational segments” – may become an element of alternative learning paths according to precisely stipulated rules. These latter paths are clearly relevant in a lifelong learning perspective as well as in fostering the so-called “knowledge society”.
- the existing quality assessments focus on adequate in-depth level measurements rather than checking whether institutions provide the appropriate sentences on paper about the level of their study programmes. The quality assurance agencies have to focus on contents rather than procedures and have to be genuinely independent and not semi-independent from governments or universities as too often appears to be the case. The international character of evaluation panels should be the rule rather than the exception in assessments, to guarantee that the same level requirements are valid beyond national borders. On the other hand, external quality assurance agencies also ought to diversify their assessment procedures, so that, based on proven merit, particular institutions can be considered quasi self-accrediting institutions and serve as standards.

The inevitable outcome of more thorough master level assessments will probably be that some of the present master degrees have to be transformed into postgraduate certificates for bachelors.

- **Doctoral studies**

In view of the many initiatives in European countries to boost the number of doctorates, the Coimbra Group Universities warn, in much the same way as above concerning master degrees, against a too broad interpretation of the

“same level but different orientation” principle, especially in connection with the introduction of many professional or industrial doctorates.

In a previous position paper¹⁾ the Coimbra Group has expressed its strong commitment to the doctoral degree and has especially stressed that high quality doctoral training can only be provided in high quality research environments, such as research universities with strong credentials in academic research, where it is possible for doctoral students to be members of research groups, benefit from research schools and a critical mass of researchers. The quality requirements defined for candidates, doctoral training, supervision committees, theses and the thesis defence should be the same for all doctoral students regardless of their research orientation.

Coimbra Group Universities acknowledge that doctoral programmes may take various forms, ranging from the traditional academic research-based doctoral training programme to predominantly applied research doctoral projects where part of the research input may arise from professional activities and experiences outside the traditional research environment, thus generating professional experience as an integral part of the research process. The Coimbra Group Universities have no objection to such “professional doctorates” or “industrial doctorates”, with different kinds of division of labour between an academic supervisor and external co-supervisors provided that the main supervisor is a recognised, active researcher with academic credentials and affiliation to a university and that the responsibility for evaluation, examination and the defence rests with the university.

2. Institutional diversity

In many European countries the rigid institutional divide between universities and other types of higher education institutions (University College, Hochschule) has disappeared or has at least been weakened considerably. There is more flexibility in study programmes, mobility between different types of institutions is encouraged and government funding systems have become more transparent and less based on tradition.

At the same time the “academic arms race” to belong to the world’s top institutions has been intensified rather than weakened by this process. Several thousand European higher education institutions now pursue the financially impossible and possibly self-destructive strategy to reach an unobtainable world-class status as research universities. This contrasts strongly with the United States where among a similar global number of higher education institutions only about 100 to 150 institutions deliver substantial numbers of doctoral degrees and are considered to be research universities. International rankings of universities based on research excellence clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of the concentrated US approach.

A classification exercise based on profiles and institutional strategies of the European higher education institutions is probably one of the major challenges for the post 2010 Bologna Process. In much the same way as the Carnegie classification system has taught US institutions to which institutional profile they belong and how they can strive for excellence within a specific category, Europe has to develop its own classification system to bring academic peace to the old continent. Pilot classification attempts point toward a multidimensional classification system in which not only research excellence is used as a parameter, but also the type and orientation of the predominant degrees provided by the institution, its educational approach and quality, its regional impact and community involvement, its degree of internationalisation orientation, etc.

The major challenge remains to convince institutions and their governments that it is as valuable to strive for excellence as a predominantly undergraduate teaching institution, as it is for other institutions to strive for excellence predominantly as a research institution. Governments should contribute to the appeasement of the academic arms race by not stimulating institutions to

participate in it, but by introducing an alternative regulatory framework designed to decrease competition and increase collaboration among institutions and to offer incentives to foster differentiation in institutional missions. Within such a regulatory framework institutions should be given autonomy and lump-sum funding to allow them to set their own targets and to build their own attractiveness and reputation, not least by offering original student-centred study programmes with plenty of attention to internationalisation and multi-disciplinarity. Students should be the main judges of the educational quality of the institutions and such judgments have to be included in rankings of higher education institutions.

3. Mobility

The Coimbra Group Universities have supported the development of international mobility for decades, favouring both international attractiveness and exchanges. A new mobility thrust is now initiated by the European Commission, of which the main issues are summarised in a High Level Expert Group document ²⁾.

The Coimbra Group Universities were prominently represented in the original Erasmus Programme and are still extremely active in student exchange activities³⁾. The Coimbra Group pays special attention to the monitoring of two main indicators, which characterise the degree of internationalisation of a given university, i.e. the number of regularly enrolled foreign students (i.e. international degree seeking students) and the number of exchange students (i.e. credit seeking students, both outgoing and incoming) ³⁾. According to our latest survey (2006-2007) the 38 universities of the Coimbra Group, which represent less than two per cent of all higher education institutions active in Erasmus, “saw” almost twenty per cent of the total Erasmus mobility. Moreover in the same academic year the Coimbra Group universities sent about 1750 students to European higher education institutions under programmes other than Erasmus and 4600 students to higher education institutions in the rest of the world.

The Coimbra Group Universities are at present concerned about the apparent slowdown in international mobility, coinciding with the introduction of the new Bologna structures. They strongly support efforts to counter this phenomenon. More precisely, it is felt that a mobility culture has still a considerable potential for development at grass-root level among teachers as well as students. Institutions have to make room in their study programmes to allow for mobility and offer incentives to promote student participation. Teachers should recognise the added value that a well planned mobility scheme may give to their own students in terms of complementary learning outcomes and competences and should consider well-planned opportunities for mobility as a real asset to their own degree course. Students should be assisted in transforming their mobility dream into a concrete plan, aimed at improving their personal, academic and professional skills and at fostering in-depth awareness of being European/world citizens.

“Internationalisation” developments of this kind will not take place without full support from higher education institutions, without incentives from the governments to those institutions that excel in such activities, without monitoring by quality assurance agencies.

The Coimbra Group feels that the time is now ripe for major initiatives:

- a) To promote a numerical increase in exchanges, adequately responding to the EC numerical targets and actions, which become more and more ambitious; as suggested in EU documents: “*the long term target is for mobility to become the rule and no longer the exception*” ⁴⁾, e.g. by introducing a “*window for mobility*” in all study programmes. Attention should be given to developing the dormant mobility potentials at doctoral and master level. According to our Position Paper on doctoral programmes¹⁾, mobility at doctoral level should become a compulsory ingredient in research training. Co-operation among departments on thesis work carried out by exchange master students may foster reciprocal exchanges of knowledge among research groups and open

- new co-operation paths. University networks such as the Coimbra Group can clearly be instrumental in promoting increased mobility;
- b) To launch a benchmark initiative to set up quality guidelines in mobility programmes, on the basis of indicators of student performance, transparency of recognition procedures, level of language preparation, availability of sound information and orientation. Also here university networks such as the Coimbra Group, with its strong mobility tradition, may act as an important broker;
 - c) To contribute to concrete quality opportunities for vertical mobility, according to the motto "*bachelor cycle at home, master abroad*". Again university networks can promote shared information and knowledge at faculty and degree course level among partner universities, recognise existing convergences at master and doctoral level and favour vertical mobility of students. Within this context benchmarking networks at discipline level can sow the seeds for future coordinated action in mobility.

However, increased internationalisation is about more than increased student mobility. Teacher mobility, visiting professors and international teaching staff play quite a role in the modernisation agenda set up by the European Commission. The attractiveness potential of the Coimbra Group Universities has been demonstrated, e.g., by EC data showing that the first four positions among higher education institutions in "incoming Erasmus Lecturers Mobility" are occupied by universities of the Coimbra Group. A recent initiative of the Coimbra Group is the organisation of "benchmarking" seminars for deans in various disciplines, which could contribute to an increase in exchanges of faculty, thus enhancing the percentage of "foreign" teaching staff and favouring common best practice approaches to teaching/learning. The high level of participation of Coimbra Group Universities in the pilot project "Tuning educational structures in Europe" is another sign in the direction of identifying common reference points for the provision of teaching/learning in the European Higher Education Area.

The development of joint programmes is another activity in which universities should participate more strongly, whenever there is a clear added value in combining the expertise present in different higher education institutions. Actual numbers³⁾ again show the high participation rate of Coimbra Group Universities in *Erasmus Mundus* Master Courses and External Co-operation Windows. Past experience shows that joint programmes can enhance the number of both enrolled foreign students and exchange students. Within this context university networks can share good practice in joint management of programmes.

Finally, internationalisation cannot be limited to Europe and should include student and staff mobility and institutional co-operation outside the European continent. The bridging character of European programmes has led to the development of dialogue and experience with co-operation tools, which can be put to good use in world-wide co-operation. The European experience has provided useful models and tools, ready for use in a wider context.

Social mobility

The social dimension of the Bologna Process has been approached by several actors⁵⁾. The issue is quite complex, ranging from the right to access university to portability of grants and pension schemes⁶⁾. The Coimbra Group Universities notice that the restructuring of the higher education systems along the lines of the Bologna Process has not drastically increased participation in higher education. They support continued efforts to further democratise access to higher education, by committing themselves to be proactive in this difficult area of action and to adequately promote and respond to the multiple levels of action⁶⁾ (by national and regional administrations, higher education and research associations, individual institutes) needed to endow the European Higher Education Area with an environment, where social and physical mobility are available to all citizens.

4. Education and Society

It is a long time since universities were 'ivory towers' where academics seemed to be unaware of the surrounding world. There is an awareness of the contributions to society needed, e.g., the employability of graduates and the potentials of technology transfer.

Coimbra Group Universities have followed this change in education paradigms towards increased employability and applicability, but they caution against limiting activities to these measures alone. All too often employability is confounded with 'employment' and the need to train a well educated work force. But higher education is about far more than preparing the next cohort of workers and about far more than transferring acquired scientific knowledge to the economic benefit of society. Apart from acquiring new knowledge and skills students have to be trained as responsible individuals and mature citizens. Only in this way will future graduates have the skills and the knowledge to contribute to the development of the societies they will enter – to create new enterprises, new jobs, alternative ways of solving problems, function in multi-cultural environments, etc. "Employability" is about the social role of future graduates, not the short-sighted fulfilment of today's labour market needs. The present economic crisis only further underlines the need to have a clear focus on how diverse and multi-faceted, creative and entrepreneurial the future graduates need to be. Universities train people to think, to synthesise, to combine, to analyse – they train tomorrow's inventive, responsible entrepreneurs. Universities should not focus exclusively on delivering experts with immediately useful knowledge as there are far greater challenges for European universities than just contributing to the knowledge society and the economy. Universities should remain safe and free havens for the development of visionaries and for research without any apparent and/or immediate economic benefit.

Apart from acquiring new knowledge and skills students have to be trained as responsible individuals and mature citizens. Forming responsible individuals also includes offering opportunities for ethical reasoning to create awareness among students and graduates of the ethical dimensions of their words and deeds in the environment in which they live and act.

European society is increasingly becoming multicultural and student populations in higher education are following this trend. Universities can therefore be expected to also serve their societies by promoting intercultural understanding and dialogue and by developing intercultural competences to enable graduates to act more effectively and responsibly in a multicultural environment.

5. Conclusion

The Coimbra Group Universities have enthusiastically embraced the Bologna Process, as they appreciated the added value of increased transnational transparency. In this position paper they have identified a number of critical issues that need follow-up in the years to come:

- a shift in attention from structures to contents
- more transparency in institutional diversity
- genuine support to mobility
- permanent attention to the societal role of universities.

They are confident that internationally attractive and competitive universities will emerge from the present process, ready to face the challenges of a globalising world.

Coimbra Group Universities are at the origin of the very concept of 'university', now ten centuries old. Even among the historical universities, with their richness in academic traditions, there is no single formula for the way in which higher education institutions have to be organised and governed, or for the programmes that have to be offered. But in its fullest richness a university has to be a meeting place of many disciplines, a *studium generale*, where there is room for

interdisciplinary confrontation, for intellectual and cultural development, where the borders of the present scientific understanding are being questioned and shifted, where knowledge is transferred to new generations trained to become knowledgeable and critical individuals.

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- (5) See for instance "EUROSTUDENT III 2005 - 2008: Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe", Final report, June 2008
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