



Education International
Internationale de l'Éducation
Internacional de la Educación



EI/ETUCE Statement

The teachers' voice in the Sorbonne/Bologna debate on the future of European Higher education and research: a contribution to the Berlin Inter-Governmental Conference on Higher Education

1. The important debate which has taken place in Europe around the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations has largely been at ministerial level. While organisations representing institutions of higher education and students at the European level have been encouraged to engage in the debate, teachers and research workers have mostly been left out of these processes. EI (Europe) and ETUCE are determined that in the debate which must now follow the Berlin inter-ministerial Conference, the voice of higher education teachers and researchers is heard, and the broader issues relating to the transformation of Europe's higher education systems are addressed.

The higher education and research unions believe that the historic role of the universities must be sustained and developed to meet the needs of Europe's society and its citizens, and that this is at least as important as the imperatives of the global market place, which seem to underlie the thinking of Sorbonne/Bologna. Therefore, the unions in the higher education and research sector, throughout EI(Europe) and ETUCE, wish to set out their vision of future higher education and assert their right to participate in the debate. Where appropriate, we also wish to engage our own members, the universities in which they work and their students more fully in the debate. We are also conscious of the global challenge to higher education and research represented by the negotiations under the General Agreement on Trade in Services, which interplays with the Sorbonne / Bologna process, but beside which 'Sorbonne / Bologna' is a model of transparency and open debate. We strongly believe that the links between these global and European level processes must be made more open, and the implications of both for the future character of Europe's higher education and research must be subject to a full debate in which academic staff as well as institutions and students, can express their views.

2. EI(Europe) and ETUCE look to the Berlin Conference and the debate which follows, to re-focus the discussion on the broader issues confronting higher education not only on an enlarged European arena, but in relation to European higher education in the global arena. In particular it is essential to assert that higher education and research are activities of civil societies which belong in the public domain. The character of the intergovernmental debate which has taken place so far, acknowledges that higher education is part of the public service and has broad societal goals which demand a governmental and official action. While private resources have become a significant part of higher education and research financing, we would argue strongly that the public character of higher education must be sustained. This is essential if the long-term role of higher education and research is to be achieved, in respect of the generation and transmission of knowledge and culture; widening access; and lifelong learning. The clear and authoritative assertion of the public service character of higher education and research will be vital if they are to be protected from exposure to the GATS (although the public service protections within

GATS are untested and seem likely to prove inadequate). We therefore strongly support the view of the EU in GATS negotiations, not to offer more liberalisation in the area of education.

Much of the debate within European higher education systems so far has focused on the Bologna proposal for convergence to a more consistent European model of higher education qualifications, based on Bachelors', Masters' and Doctoral degrees, with specified time limits. The national responses to these proposals have been very mixed, and focusing on these issues has to some extent distorted the debate. National systems seem to be shaping the degree proposals to accommodate their own systems, while being distracted from the emerging issues which arise from new educational, social and technological demands on higher education. It is essential for higher education teachers and for institutions to be integrated in the debate because they are more directly in touch with these demands and have the day to day responsibility for meeting them.

3. Exercising this responsibility is a complex task: universities have a social responsibility and must be publicly accountable, but on the other hand they must retain the institutional autonomy which is essential to advance scholarship and inquiry, and to academic freedom. The character of universities, and their relationship to the state is changing as a result of mass higher education. However the fundamental principles on which they are founded remain valid and universities must be cautious in their responses to « market place » pressures, if their vital character is to be maintained. It is not in the long-term interests of society, the students, employers, or universities themselves, to commodify higher education itself. The principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom need to be balanced with social responsibilities, but they remain important characteristics of university and academic staff relationships. This is important in itself but is also essential if universities are to remain as key sources of innovation in response to continuing and accelerating social and scientific demands.
4. The environment in which universities and academic staff operate is shaped by many forces. Governments and European institutions must work with universities and their staffs to defend and develop the universities' role in appropriate ways, and this shared effort is essential if the intention behind the Sorbonne/Bologna process is to be met. The distinctive character of European higher education needs to be protected if it is to survive the pressure of the global « market place » and to « compete » within it. None of the partners in Europe's higher education systems have an interest in a bland homogenised « higher education product », nor in the medium term, will this be a valued commodity in a future global higher education marketplace.
5. EI(Europe), ETUCE and their member organisations in the sector wishes to work with university managements, governments and other policy makers at the national and European levels, to develop broader strategies for the future of Europe's higher education and research. We believe that this broader debate which we envisage is essential to a long-term strategy for European higher education.
6. We believe that the Berlin Conference must carry forward a dialogue between European governments and policy-makers and the representatives of the academic staff upon whom the principal responsibility falls for actually delivering education and research, and who will also be at the centre of innovation and the identification of emerging trends and needs. Academic staff need to work under conditions which enable them to respond to diverse demands. In many European countries, academic staff have responded to the demands of « massification », lifelong learning, and the pressures of employers and the market place, without additional resources or recognition of the extra burdens which have been placed upon them. We believe that this trend cannot continue without inflicting permanent damage on higher education and equality of courses and research outcomes. Particular problems which need to be tackled, are casualisation, short-term contracts, the increasing difficulty in pursuing a career in higher education or research, and growing demands to undertake administrative duties or pursue outside funding. Academic staff need a stable and supportive environment in which to work, and the prospect of a proper professional career. We believe that it is in the interests of all the parties in higher education and of society itself, to enable teachers and researchers in higher education to achieve these conditions.

Also in regard to further enhancement of mobility of academic staff, wage and working conditions must be given a higher priority in the process than seen until now, and EI(Europe), ETUCE and their member organisations must be given the opportunity to contribute to such a process with vital inputs and information.

7. The Bologna proposal for more comparable degrees raises the question of quality assurance. We are conscious that the issue of quality has also been raised by the process of massification of higher education in the last twenty years. EI(Europe) and ETUCE are committed to the maintenance and improvement of quality in higher education and research. Our members working in the sector have struggled to maintain quality in the face of new demands and change as well as often severe reductions in the finance per student. We would assert that quality assurance must be primarily the responsibility of teachers themselves both through personal responsibility as members of the academic profession and also through peer assessment and support. Any systems which are external to individual universities, should only be concerned with adequacy of the universities' own arrangements, and not an assessment of individual staff. The purpose of quality assurance is support and improvement, and the resource implications identified by quality assurance processes must be addressed. Quality systems reflect the character of the national higher education systems and cultures to which they relate, and this diversity must be respected. Teachers are central to the delivery of quality and they must be given the opportunity and encouragement to participate in professional development. This is essential for them to maintain and develop pedagogic and subject specialist skills, or to take on new roles, in the face of continued and intense pressures of change.

EI(Europe) and ETUCE in collaboration with GEW from Germany held a forum in Berlin in April 2003, where the main themes were quality (and accreditation) and wage and working conditions. The general reports of the Forum are not yet finalised, but we will be glad to distribute the results as a contribution to the debate in these fields in the years ahead.

Education International (EI) at the global level has undertaken work on guidelines on the transnational provision of higher education. We believe it is essential that such guidelines are developed to maintain quality of higher education and research and to protect the character of higher education in an increasingly commodified global environment. A draft set of guidelines is in preparation prepared within EI and currently under discussion with UNESCO.

8. Mass higher education and life long learning, taken together, amounts to an educational and social revolution. This is particularly true when we are able to see the full impact of communication technologies and globalisation. Holistic planning involving all the partners in higher education is now an urgent task. Much of the experience of dealing with these trends so far, resides in the universities. Once again, we assert that our members must be integrated into the debate which up to now has largely taken place among European and national level decision-makers.
9. Perhaps the most difficult area to predict the future of higher education, is in respect of electronic communications and the internet. Already, most higher education teachers and research workers have experienced a transformation in their working practices and in the information and communication potential at their fingertips. While this has generated new opportunities on a dramatic scale, it has also added new pressures on their lives. The pace of change and the development of new technical capacities requires continuous responses from academics, including the regular updating of their own skills. However, significant as these changes are, the changes which are to come in respect of education delivery through electronic media will be far greater. Teachers are right to be concerned about these trends, not only for their own sake, but for the quality of education and for its ability to continue to meet the changing needs of students. (This is particularly true as the student population diversifies, and as many new students need the support of contact with teachers and peers). Therefore we would argue that teachers' and students' representatives must be closely involved in the development and application of new media for the delivery of higher education.

10. These new media are only one example of the pace of change which higher education needs to mediate. Frequently, trends which will eventually affect the whole of education, have their first impact on higher education. This is particularly true of globalisation, where teachers and researchers in universities have been part of a global intellectual community for many years, but where the internet and other globalisation trends have marked a dramatic intensification of worldwide cooperation and dialogue between academics. Higher education institutions provide the « home » for teacher educators, and teacher education is the driving force for change in education systems as a whole. Teacher education now is marked by patterns of cooperation between universities and schools; also, teachers at all levels have been quick to recognise their own particular need for continuous professional development, and universities and schools together have often worked to meet these needs (in many cases making innovative use of new technologies and teaching methods). EI(Europe) welcomes these trends, which reinforce the sense of unity of the teaching profession and a holistic approach to the development of education, in which life long learning is recognised as a crucial characteristic.

11. In conclusion, EI(Europe) and ETUCE believe that the Sorbonne/Bologna process has not yet explored these issues in sufficient depth, nor has it opened the debate sufficiently to include the key partners for change. If the debate is to lead to a genuine “European space for higher education and research”, we believe that the debate must be both broadened and deepened. In particular we must search together for an appropriate and sustainable model of higher education, in which the distinctive character of European higher education, including the public role and autonomy of universities, balance the global pressures towards a higher education « market place ».