European Trends in Teaching and Learning: experiences and practice

25 June, 2010 European Youth Centre Strasbourg

REPORT

Context

On June 25th, 2010, the Council of Europe hosted the first Round Table on “European trends in teaching and learning: experiences and practices”. The event, which gathered academic representatives from higher education institutions from both sides of the river Dniestr, was the first in a series of Confidence-building measures in the field of higher education. The Council of Europe Confidence Building Measures programme for the Transnistrian region was adopted by the Committee of Ministers in January 2010, and covers activities in media and civil society as well as in higher education.

The programme of seminars in higher education for 2010 was developed to include three seminars for university management, teaching staff and students of higher education institutions on both sides of the river Dniestr (two on the left side and four on the right). This initial seminar focused on European trends in teaching and learning, and the future seminars will follow up on some of the key areas discussed, thus ensuring coherence to the programme series.

Objectives

Twenty four participants – both academic staff and students - came to Strasbourg from six higher education institutions on both sides of the river Dniestr. The aim was to explore issues of teaching and learning in higher education that are critically important on both sides of the river, and where there is much common experience to reflect upon. A further objective of the Round Table was to question the extent to which innovative teaching methods have been and can be further introduced into the every-day practice of higher education institutions. The theme was also chosen because, despite being a topic of major importance to all higher education institutions and stakeholders on both sides of the river, it has no impact on political or territorial issues.

Facilitators

The Council of Europe invited three experts, selected for their experience of European cooperation in higher education, to provide input to the seminar, and to facilitate the discussions. These experts were:

- Per Nyborg, former Chair of the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research, and also the Head of the Bologna Secretariat from 2003 – 2005.
- Klemen Miklavic, currently researcher at the Centre for Education Policy Studies, at the University of Ljubljana, and alumnus of the European Students’ Union (ESU).
• David Crosier, higher education policy analyst for the Eurydice Network, and formerly programme manager at the European Universities Association, and staff member at the Council of Europe.

Content of Round Table discussions

The programme for the Round Table was launched by introductory speeches from Mrs Claudia Luciani, Director of Political Advice and Co-operation, and by Mrs Ólafur Olafsdottir, Acting Director of Education and Languages. Mrs Luciani stressed the role of the Council of Europe in protecting human rights, upholding the rule of law and embedding common values throughout the European continent. She also stressed the commitment of the Council of Europe to this process of Confidence Building in the Transnistrian region, highlighting the range of work in which the organisation is engaged that can serve the communities on both sides of the river.

Mrs Ólafsdottir focused on the role and work of the Council of Europe in education, and particularly stressed the importance of education as a holistic concept that facilitates individual and societal development, and consciously fosters a wide range of competences required for life in democratic society. Mrs Ólafsdottir pointed to four main purposes of education, and stressed the importance of considering all four aspects throughout discussions: education for the labour market; education for life as active citizens; education for personal development, and education for general knowledge. She also proposed three main principles to guide educational development: public responsibility, academic freedom, and quality.

These two introductory speeches laid strong foundations for the discussions ahead, and touched on fundamental issues of the mission and purposes of higher education that were to be central and recurrent throughout the Round Table discussions.

Per Nyborg's presentation (see annex 1) focused on common principles for Europe, and in particular on the notion of public responsibility for higher education. He pointed out that the principles underlying the construction of the European Higher Education Area are also the most appropriate starting point for developing cooperation in the context of academic relations between Moldovan and Transnistrian higher education institutions. In this context, he suggested that exchange of information and communication between the two academic communities should be improved; that recognition procedures should be based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and that academic links and exchanges should be supported and encouraged.

David Crosier focused on developments in teaching and learning methods that have taken place throughout the first decade of the Bologna process (see annex 2). In particular he looked at the impact of the Bologna process in encouraging a shift from input-oriented education towards a concept of higher education focused on learning outcomes.

These presentations were followed by a discussion focusing on the relationships between the different institutional actors present – particularly the relationship between students and professors. This discussion was extremely positive, as students outlined different ways in which student participation in decision-making has been encouraged and developed in recent years. Staff and students were also keen to point out that many aspects of Bologna process implementation had delivered tangible improvements to their academic lives, and there is now
greater attention being paid to what students really need from higher education, and how these needs can best be met.

Participants also discussed a number of common challenges that remain in implementing new models and concepts. In particular, certain problems have arisen as a result of the staged approach taken by some institutions in introducing structural reforms. Thus the first cycle of higher education has been tackled before the second cycle – rather than the two cycles being considered as part of the same integral reform process.

Moreover, it is only now, several years after the beginning of reforms, that the third cycle is becoming a part of the debate on higher education reform. Here tricky issues are also emerging because the responsibility for doctoral education rests with the Academies of Sciences. In addition, participants also pointed to difficulties that are a consequence of having two different third cycle degrees – the PhD and the Doctor of Sciences.

Participants stressed that it is important to look at the changes taking place in the rest of Europe and other world regions in relation to doctoral education, and to take these developments into account. If not, there is a danger of continuing to operate in structures that are suited to a past reality, rather than adapting and anticipating the societal challenges ahead.

Another major topic of discussion was the way in which higher education reform has tended to be seen as an issue for higher education only – and the relationship with society and the labour market has been ignored. It is now increasingly clear that employers and companies need to be involved in debates, as not only do they have to understand the nature of the new degrees, but they should also be providing information on the needs of the labour market for which higher education is in part preparing students.

Participants stressed that societal actors should be involved in discussions on the kind of higher education provision that is most beneficial for the evolving society and labour market. The positive message from the Round Table is that these new needs for higher education institutions to work with employers are now recognised, and efforts are being made to develop new forms of cooperation.

It was also interesting to note that some institutions, particularly the highly specialised music colleges, have managed to preserve a form of education where all graduates are likely to find employment in their chosen specialty – the performing or teaching of music. While this is no longer the reality for many music schools around Europe - where students need to be prepared for a wider range of creative industry careers - for the moment the high quality niche education in this part of the world appears to be standing up well to the challenges of the changing world.

The Council of Europe experts noted that the nature of these discussions with regard to achievements and challenges arising from the Bologna process was no different to comparable debates in other parts of Europe. Indeed while particular aspects of higher education development relate to local decisions and conditions, many of the issues resonate across all European higher education systems. Moreover, there is so far no country or institution that has found the ideal way to manage all aspects of higher education provision.

The afternoon session of the Round Table was inspired by a critical examination of student-centred learning by Klemen Miklavic (see annex 3). The main hypothesis for this presentation
was that, as a result of the transformations brought about by massification, globalisation and other major societal processes, the nature of higher education has changed dramatically. We should therefore no longer be talking about higher education as if it were the same higher education experienced twenty or thirty years ago – yet this remains the reference for many people and much contemporary higher education debate.

With this altered reality in mind, Klemen Miklavic suggested that it is time for a paradigm change in the way higher education is conceived, organised and managed. Moreover the nature of this paradigm change is a shift from conventional, teacher-led higher education to student-centred learning. Klemen Miklavic outlined the main differences in approach, and then looked at a recent study by the European Students Union and Education International where students and academic staff were asked to give their perception of how far a number of key concepts regarding student-centred learning have been adopted in higher education systems around Europe. While the title of the presentation posed the question as to whether student-centred learning is a myth or a reality, this survey suggests that it will probably take some time before a fully-fleshed concept of student-centred learning is embedded in all systems as a functional and positive reality.

The following discussion tackled the dilemma of quality of educational process versus quantity of enrolled students, put forward by representatives of two bigger comprehensive universities. In more concrete terms the participants discussed the involvement of students in institutional governance and quality assurance. Only one of the represented institutions reported an advanced system of student questionnaire on the quality of teaching. A particular interest in the mechanisms of internal quality assurance could be sensed from the debate. A representative of one university expressed the will to formalise student representation, which so far has not been put into practice.

**Main Conclusions from the Round Table**

Under the Chairmanship of Per Nyborg, the final session identified a number of issues of consensus among the participants, as well as other topics that merit further discussion.

As a conclusion to the discussion on the changing missions of higher education, Per Nyborg reminded participants how these missions have been formulated by the Council of Europe in the Recommendation Rec (2007) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research, and also referred in the Leuven Communiqué of the Bologna Process. Thus the mission of higher education is:

- Preparation for sustainable employment
- Preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic societies;
- Personal development;
- The development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

With this background, there was also clear agreement among participants that higher education is, and should remain, a public responsibility. National authorities are primarily responsible for the framework, and higher education institutions for the realisation of the different missions of higher education within this framework. Co-operation and trust between the higher education sector and public authorities is therefore an absolute necessity for a well functioning system.
Participants also agreed on two important points for developing higher education in Moldova and the Transnistrian region:

1) Many of the challenges being faced in Moldova and the Transnistrian region are the same as those being faced by other European countries.
2) The most effective way in facing such common challenges is by sharing experience and benefitting from the experience of others.

From this basis a number of European-level topics were identified that are also particular challenges for Moldova and the Transnistrian region. While some of these issues were already discussed briefly during this first Round Table, all of them are worthy of more focused debate. As this Round Table is the first in a series of three, it is hoped that some of these topics can be addressed in the follow-up events:

- Co-operation between institutions;
- Student and staff mobility;
- Recognition of study periods and degrees from partner institutions;
- Social dimension of higher education, and student support;
- Involvement of industry and society in curriculum development and in institutional governance;
- Quality assurance and student involvement.

This Round Table illustrated how many aspects of higher education are common between systems and countries. Although taking diverse forms and realised through different languages and cultures, in this field at least we can easily learn from each other and also cooperate for the benefit of all. This Round Table proved to be an important step in confidence-building by improving good communication and encouraging networking between representatives of higher education institutions from both sides of the river Dniestr. It is therefore a common hope from the Round Table that the positive atmosphere, constructive discussions, and creative potential for future development experienced by all present in Strasbourg will not be quickly forgotten, and will serve as a strong basis for future action.