

# Challenges of Global Competition in Tertiary Education

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# Challenges of Global Competition in Tertiary Education\*

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FOR EUROPEAN EXCELLENCE, VILLA VIGONI

I believe that in the decade or so that has passed since the Bologna Declaration, we have arrived at a critical juncture, and right now it is not yet clear which direction developments are likely to take, nor is it clear whether under conditions characterised by new economic and social challenges, Europe will build on or squander its strengths. Whatever the case, one thing that we would all agree is that tertiary education is one of the most important factors that will determine Europe's future position in the face of globalisation.

This was the background to the series of symposia held at Villa Vigoni with the theme of the European Higher Education Area, the aim of which was to establish just where we are at the moment with regard to this process. The three symposia took place between

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July 2010 and April 2011 under the overall banner of “The European Higher Education Area: Vision, Fiction or Reality? Taking Stock” with the individual names of “Education”, “What does the Bologna Reform Accomplish?”, and “The European Higher Education Area – for Flagship Projects or new Towers of Pisa?” One of the main aims was to move the discussion outside the national framework to which it tends to be restricted and to conduct a comparison of the ways in which different European countries have coped with the challenges of higher education reform over the last decade. As a bi-national institution with a European orientation, Villa Vigoni is particularly well suited as a venue for conducting a European comparison such as this, as well as for discussing and exchanging experiences outside national boundaries.

First, though, a few words about Villa Vigoni. Villa Vigoni is located at Lake Coma; it is a German-Italian institute, established 25 years ago as a bi-national centre of excellence by a government agreement between the foreign ministers at the time, Genscher and Andreotti. Its purpose is to promote, in a European spirit, exchanges between Germany and Italy, in the fields of science, politics and culture. Indeed, the presidents of the two states will be meeting there soon for the second time, to discuss the future of Europe with young students. Villa Vigoni is set in extensive grounds, including park and woodland; it is a *villeggiatura* in the old meaning of a country house, which not only offers a place to partake of concentrated intellectual discourse, but also provides a framework in which people can develop the mutual trust to talk about difficult topics.

To return to the theme of higher education forums: these mainly focused on a comparison between Germany and Italy, although they were later joined by Switzerland, France and the UK. Moreover, the perspectives presented by Poland and the Czech Republic, as new member states of the European Union, in presentations and discussions, have proven to be particularly fruitful: against a background of seeking to overcome the legacy of the communist regimes in these countries, the Bologna Reform shines a particularly bright light of freedom and opportunity. What I wish to do now is to present you with a number of indicators for current assessments, from which conclusions may subsequently be drawn.

One thing that was quite remarkable was the fundamental dual consensus that ran through all three conferences, which may be

regarded as symptomatic: the declared aims of the Bologna Process have lost none of their original validity and continue to be shared; however, it is also clear that the problems that exist accrue out of the implementation. The excessively technocratic system is an 'original sin' and a central contributor to the drop in acceptance. Nevertheless, the situation has changed in recent years: if it is clear that Bologna is irreversible, it is just as clear that criticism is no longer seen as taboo. Reality has made it all too clear that essential Bologna objectives, such as mobility, have not been accomplished; there are some study regions in which the incidence of translocation is lower than ever. The focus has shifted meanwhile: criticism is no longer regarded with suspicion, as the retrospective idealisation of an ideal state that has never actually existed – now the road is clear for something new. This explains the current, apparently paradoxical mixture, that although assessments of the reform's successes tend to be critical, "sine ira et studio", a certain optimism can nevertheless be felt.

One point of view has been stressed repeatedly, both by the universities and by the ministries, and it is perhaps a key to the guardedly positive change in mood: a reform cannot be successfully implemented against those who will be affected by it; acceptance can only be achieved if the role of the teaching staff is taken into consideration. The same applies to the mood among students – for they too were included in the symposia at Villa Vigoni, alongside principals and ministers – which was often characterised by a sense of insecurity and a lack of transparency, a feeling of constantly having to overcome bureaucratic obstacles. What they demand, and with some justification, not least in view of the fact that the reform process is taking far longer than an individual study cycle, is a discourse between politicians and teachers & students alike, which, they say, was the real trigger behind the reform.

It is very interesting and informative to compare the reality of the reform in the various countries, whereby the most exciting contrast can be seen between Switzerland and the Czech Republic. Switzerland was the first country to completely adapt its system in line with the new degree structure, consciously selecting this field as a symbol of proof of its pro-European stance. An initial student survey conducted in 2010 produced the following key findings: in general, the BA is not regarded as a professional qualification, if at all, it is seen as one that only leads to middle positions; the

idea of a taught course of study meets with widespread mental rejection, which forces the educational character into the defensive; knowledge and competency goals are uniformly confused; finally, on a more jovial note, the basic unit of the 'working hour', for instance, '30 working hours', has proven to be a complete abstraction, devoid of any concrete idea. All of this is, however, based on a very good student supervisory system, with no appreciable drop-out rate – Switzerland does not have to solve those problems of mass universities that form a tacit background in other countries.

In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, the emphasis is on something else entirely: the system inherited from the communists in 1990 provided university places for 10% of the pupils in each year's final school grade, and adhered to a strict separation between teaching and research; today, two-thirds of the Bologna Reform have been implemented, and expectations have been more than fulfilled. Students have great freedom in the selection of their courses, whereby the ability to read critically is regarded as a key qualification. There is also an interesting quality assurance process which obligates universities to publish all final theses, including their appraisals, in the Internet.

When viewed against the background of different national circumstances, it becomes all the more clear just what an ambitious undertaking it is to create a harmonised European Higher Education Area and how strongly this influences the institutional structure in each respective national higher education area. It is therefore urgent that a critical debate is initiated to consider the effects on institutions, since this has so far only been undertaken to a minimal degree. As for Germany, the old distribution of roles has run into a state of disarray, and opportunities that the system provides for the protagonists have not been taken: the concept of 'Bologna' has yet to be incorporated in the self-image of the universities, whose overall principles are exchangeable.

A colleague from Rome presented a passionate plea in favour of the university as a basis for Europe's competitiveness. He pointed out that the European university evolved in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a symbol of the cities' self-confidence. On the other hand, he pointed out, the way that reform was being implemented in Italy was precisely the opposite: it destroyed this identity, not merely by virtue of its trite economism, which is

robbing the universities of their autonomy, coupled with severe underfunding – Italy has the second lowest rate of higher education funding in the EU – but also, and more importantly, it is destroying the concept of the university by erroneously concentrating on “the three ‘I’s”’: ‘inglese – ingegneria – industria’. In reality, excessive bureaucratisation has created an artificial world, which makes the move from university to a work situation extremely difficult for students and calls into question the achievements of universities for society in general.

What conclusions can be drawn for the current situation and presented as future objectives? I would like to map out a number of perspectives, in four points.

1) From a centenary overview, the history of the European university has been characterised by frequent ups and downs over the last 1,000 years; yet throughout this time, it has proven to be extremely stable as an institution. If one compares it with today’s universities in other parts of the world, Europe makes quite a good impression; universities in Europe are perceived from the outside as being more competitive than one would think from their image of themselves – and as international rankings suggest, the basis of which is contradictory and against which continental Europe should better defend itself. It is, for instance, the case that Europe exports the largest proportion of academics in the world.

In line with the principle of “*aemulatio alit ingenia*”, the ongoing process of integration within the European Higher Education Area is giving rise to a considerable potential – after all, exchange creates productive competition. For this reason, networks that incorporate not only research but also teaching, as are frequently becoming established – not least at PhD level – represent one of several future paths.

2) One major challenge is the question of control; this concerns universities as administrative units as much as it does of the academic teaching. There is much movement and many models, but it is necessary to overcome a great deal in the way of miscontrol and wasted resources. There has been a severe shift in the treatment of the protagonists in the system – both the teachers and the students: increased opportunities for control afforded by the electronic media have given rise to the establishment of an

expectation of mistrust rather than a leap of faith. The consequence of this is an increase in bureaucracy with the attendant wastage of time and creative potential.

This is, however, not a completely new problem, but a mistrust that universities have always seen themselves exposed to; it is the case that they constitute a 'third sector', which is rooted in freedom and autonomy to enable it to fulfil its tasks, and which neither follows the genuine rules of a state institution and its hierarchies nor is a private enterprise. It was therefore clear – and it has been duly emphasised, particularly by representatives of private universities – that universities differ profoundly from enterprises and cannot function as purely economic models for systematic reasons. As urgent as it may be to remain detached from excessively inflexible state control, it is still barely a solution to adopt the other extreme and emulate the world of the business enterprise.

3) Wherever they are made, political objectives always constitute a contradiction that knows no solution; interestingly, however, they are no longer viewed as paralysing aporias but employed as spaces in which to search for creative solutions. It is quite obvious that the expansion in education over the last 40 years with the objective that 50% and more of each age group acquire an academic degree cannot be reversed; if anything, only the percentages can be argued about. On the other hand, the necessary financial resources are in a state of stagnation or are even falling.

It is now apparent that experiments are being conducted with new forms for the BA phase – in a certain way, an old interface from the history of the university is now being restored in people's consciousness, since the boundary between the college and the university was never totally clear and defined. What is particularly remarkable is the frequent recourse to the old liberal arts model, which migrated from Europe to the USA and is now being re-imported in a different guise. One forward-looking model is currently evolving at the University of Freiburg, in the form of a School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, with a curriculum all of its own. Similarly, Charles University in Prague has developed an interesting programme that enables intensive study.

The common denominator of all these approaches is that encounters between teachers and students as unplanned events are moving back onto centre stage, and indeed, since recently, the



“universitas”, the community of teachers and students, has been shifting more and more into the focal point of European ministerial declarations. What has so far remained omitted, however, is the quantitative aspect, for which there is no general solution under the current conditions: for how many students is such an expanded supervision and field of encounter with teachers actually possible? It is the explicit wish of the new schools not to be regarded as elite institutions, yet it is precisely here that new forms are evolving that realise the university in the emphatic sense. And the question of what opportunities are offered to highly talented students in the various European countries is a challenge in itself: here there are great differences, which it would be worthwhile studying.

4) One of the tasks that universities perform is to direct their orientation towards the future, which also includes anticipating what is to come. With regard to content, some interesting trends can be determined. The slogan ‘knowledge society’, which determined discourse for a long time, has now receded into the background; merely conveying knowledge now seems insufficient and too mechanistic. It is being replaced more and more in the foreground by qualitative aspects, such as problem solving skills, the ability to take criticism, independence, and education that also incorporates personality development – the training of the “iudicium”, for instance, was of central value for centuries. All of these are qualities that formed a basis for European success in global competition.

A particular characteristic of Europe is its cultural complexity; nowhere else in the world are there so many cultures in such a small space, in close exchange and yet in strong competition with each other. The inevitable result of this situation is that it must in future be used as a competitive advantage. It was certainly conspicuous that the symposia were characterised by a broad consensus regarding the indispensability of education and cultural competence, and this can indeed be viewed as a new development.

I would like to end my presentation at this point. In conclusion, it only remains to state that the concept of the university is alive, perhaps more alive than ever before. However, there is no simple solution, only differentiations and variations in the paths taken. This is in itself an opportunity.