

## **Reforming higher education for lifelong learning and enlargement of the European Union**

### **Context of the Research**

Across the world institutions are being encouraged to widen participation to learning and increase access to higher education for up to half the workforce. There is also pressure on higher education to provide portable, economically relevant qualifications in a system that is fully accountable. Within the European Union there is a need to accommodate a diversity of cultural and economic influences whilst moving towards a compatible qualifications system.

This project has established the Higher Education Reform Network to explore how different cultural contexts influence the procedures for the governance, decision-making, quality assurance and accountability of higher education with particular reference to issues of gender, disability, access and inclusion. It has aimed to help improve European integration strategies for the future and involves organisations from Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Sweden, Poland and the United Kingdom.

### **Key Conclusions**

It is noted that UNESCO and the OECD are presently drafting guidelines<sup>1</sup> on quality provision in cross-border higher education that envisages a voluntary code of practice. The project, also agrees with Van Damme<sup>2</sup> that there is room for a body to undertake the direct international accreditation of the outputs of higher education. However, at present, Europe is at the first level of Van Damme's six strategic levels leading to real international accreditation. Therefore, the project's principal conclusion was:

1. There is a need to address international accreditation of the outputs of European higher education.

Other broad conclusions were: -

2. European higher education is very far from being a single, homogeneous system; however diversity is important for the vitality of higher education.
3. For some countries, higher education is about skills and employability and economic growth. Whilst, for others, it is part of the struggle to re-assert a sense of national independence.
4. Possibly, the only common feature of all European higher education systems, in respect of Knowledge Society goals, is that they are under-funded.
5. All countries should improve the "inclusivity" of higher education and increase the support given in areas fundamental to the development of a vibrant knowledge society.

Other specific conclusions: -

6. The diversity of the many national higher education systems is the keystone of the strength of a European higher education area. While all systems are changing, they are changing in different ways and at different rates, but diversity should still be encouraged.
7. Although quality and accreditation are still national responsibilities, it is acknowledged that this must change with the creation of a pan-European Qualification and Accreditation structure and through various initiatives to improve the portability of certain professional qualifications.
8. There is a need for a rigorous objective benchmarked approach, relating each country's quality regime to other countries. Presently, differences in nomenclature or definition confound accurate comparability of qualifications and reduce the portability of qualifications and the mobility of labour.
9. Each country's higher education system operates under a different legal framework, has its own funding regime, accreditation and quality assurance procedures that determine how it functions. As no one national system is exactly like any other, this contributes to diversity. However, this is also a crucial factor in any attempt to establish equivalence because many aspects of this diversity are enshrined in legislation rather than custom.
10. "Employability", "learning" and "inclusivity" are three environmental factors most likely to have a significant impact on the processes of change in higher education, and over which there might be some degree of political control: -
  - *Employability* - Economic activity is unevenly distributed across Europe and mobility of labour at the European level is seen to be a necessity if sufficient skilled workers are to be available in the areas of high economic growth. Open, portable qualifications structures should be supported by a multi-disciplinary approach to skills and careers education in higher education.
  - *Learning* - Higher education is becoming increasingly just a stage in the lifelong educational process. The portability of learning necessitates "blended learning" which frees the learner from constraints of place and time and blends physical virtual mobility. Increasing the portability of learning opportunities must become one of the most important strategic priorities for European higher education at every level.
  - *Inclusivity* - The basic premise, that everyone who can benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to do so, is already well established as a guiding principle in every higher education system. But it was identified that : -
    - Higher education is almost never an inclusive learning opportunity for people with a disability.
    - Higher education needs to encourage the participation of those that have been marginalized.
    - Gender participation in higher education varies, especially with regard to seniority in the academic hierarchy. Improving equality of opportunity requires a fundamental change in attitudes reinforced by positive action.

- Higher education may be taken by an increasing proportion of the population, but that alone does not guarantee inclusivity. There is a need to facilitate positive action to redress these imbalances.

## Key Recommendations

The project's principal recommendation is the need to: -

1. Create a European higher education quality and accreditation body, building on the foundations laid by the Bologna process and other related work.

To facilitate the development of such a body, there is a need to specifically address:

2. *Research* - Such a body needs to be given the resources and direction to review and compare existing research into the international aspects of existing quality and accreditation systems, particularly that undertaken by the OECD and other organisations.
3. *Benchmarking* - Based on the progress made both by UNESCO and OECD at the global level such a body needs to develop a comprehensive and objective set of European quality indicators for all aspects of higher education that consider the: -
  - Portability of a credit or qualification at a pan-European level.
  - Choosing of indicators from existing, relevant and robust methodologies as identified through research and tested in co-operation with national agencies.
  - Process that should be universal and rigorous and open to public scrutiny. The communication systems employed should facilitate access to the process as well as to its products.
4. *Positive action* - is needed to redress the wide variations in the equality of opportunity in and between national higher education systems. In order to encourage progress and allow comparability, it is recommended that benchmarking indicators include: -
  - *Disability* - All Member states need to recognise disability in the same broad terms as the current UK Special Educational Needs Disability Act (SENDA) legislation so that access to higher education by disabled students may be compared with due statistical rigour. In order to achieve this:
    - Access to higher education by disabled persons should be a primary benchmark indicator.
    - The categories of disability reported should be the same in all Member States.
    - There is a need to provide resources that “pump-prime” such development across Member States in order to reach parity.
  - *Gender* – Participation in higher education becomes increasingly unequal as seniority increases. So, it is recommended that: -
    - Benchmarking of higher education includes accurate, comparable reporting of gender participation by standardised descriptors of institution type, subject area and by level or grade of employment.

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- The European Commission review its criteria for funding higher education Institution initiatives so as to include a requirement that an institution demonstrates compliance in the equality of opportunity of higher education staff in relation to gender.
- *Citizenship* - Higher education quality benchmarks should include a category to reflect the degree to which individual higher education systems underpin the values of active citizenship. Indicators should include a measure of the: -
  - Representation of economic and cultural minority groups in higher education in relation to the norms for higher education as a whole and those of the wider society.
  - Degree to which students in higher education achieve competence in the “key skills” essential to full participation in lifelong learning and the knowledge society.
  - Degree to which students acquire competence in foreign languages.
  - Degree to which students participate in study exchange programmes.
  - Provision of comprehensive guidance and counselling services to all learners in higher education.
  - Scope that higher education out-reach services provide opportunities for non-traditional learners to access formal and informal lifelong learning.

5. The project support’s Van Damme’s assertion<sup>3</sup> that: -

*“...[d]espite the resistance in some countries against international accreditation, I do believe that such an initiative, given that it can secure its academic status, legitimacy, credibility, and reputation, would be able to realize an important position in the global higher education field...”*

The foregoing recommendations are intended to move this process forward. But, they are not its end point.

## **Further Information**

The full title of the project is: “Higher Education Reform Network”. The final report was completed in December 2004. The project web site at: <http://www.HEreform.net>

## **Key Publications**

Journal articles

Glastra, F., Hake, B.J. & Schedler, P. (2004), ‘Lifelong learning as transitional learning’, *Adult Education Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 4, 291-307.

Glastra, F., Hake, B.J., Meijers, F. & Schedler, P. (2001), ‘Work, personal life, and the public sphere: Lifelong learning as an arena of struggle’, *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, vol. vi, no. 4, 222-229.

Glastra, J. & Hake, B.J., ‘Transitional learning and the experience of border-crossings: An empirical study of the trajectories of political refugees in Dutch higher education’, currently in peer-review with *Adult Education Quarterly*.

This Briefing Paper has been prepared by pjb Associates with funding from the EC DG for Research Hake, B.J., 'European Union Enlargement and citizenship: the role of higher education', currently in peer-review by *Studies in Higher Education*.

Hake, B.J., Kamp, M. van der, & Slagter, M. (2002), 'The role of higher education in lifelong learning: The Dutch case', *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, Vol. 50, No.1, 37-44.

Schedler, P., Glastra, F. & Hake, B.J. (2003), 'Glass ceiling for women in higher education', *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, vol. viii, no. 3, 26-33.

Sebkova H., (2002); *Projekt HERN (Higher Education Research Network)*. AULA, 10, 1/2002, p.48."

Sebkova H., (2003); *Report of HERN Seminar 6 in Krakow, 3-5 July 2003*; AULA, Vol 11, nr 3, 2003 p55.

Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou, D., Margaritis, and Kedraka, K. (2003) *The vocational integration of people suffering from Thalassaemia Major in Northern Greece*. NEA PAIDEIA, No 107, October 2003 (in Greek).

Tereseviciene M., Kaminskiene L., Zuzeviciute V. (2004). *Adult Education as a Prerequisite for Social Initiatives*. Journal of Adult and Continuing Education. ISSN 1343-3210. Vol.6. (Japan). p. 37-56;

Zuzeviciute V. (2004) *Andragogical Elements of Learning and Approaches to Teaching and Learning in Lithuanian Institutions of Higher Education*. Tiltai. Nr. 19; p. 155-163.

### **Books and chapters in edited volumes**

Glastra, F., Hake, B.J. & Schedler, P. (2004), 'Transitional learning in the information society'. In: B. van Gent, B. J. Hake & J. Katus (Eds), *Adult Education and Globalisation: Past and Present*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 151-174.

Hake, B.J. (2004), 'Fragility of the "Employability Agenda": Flexible Life Courses and the Reconfiguration of Lifelong Learning'. In: D. Aitchebera (Ed.), *Making lifelong learning a reality: emerging patterns in Europe and Asia*, Kluwer Academic International.

Krakowska, M., (2003) *HERN project and use of e-forum in forming the European educational area*, in: *Distance Education. New Technologies in Information and Librarianship*, ed. by Maria Kocojowa, Jagiellonian University Press, Krakow 2003.

Svaton O., Vlk. A., *Academic staff in the Czech Republic: the extraordinary species homo academicus*, international comparative study "The International Attractiveness of the Academic Workplace in Europe" CHEPS, Enschede, 2003

### **Research Institutions**

Centre for Educational Research, Vytauto Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania

Centre for Higher Education Studies (CHES), Prague, Czech Republic

Centre for Learning in Organisations, European Society for Research on Education of Adults (ESREA), University of Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands

Continuing Education Development Foundation (CEDeF), Ministry of Education, Riga, Latvia

Department of Psychology, National and Capodestrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

Interuniversitäres Institut für Informationssysteme zur Unterstützung Sehgeschädigter Studierender (I<sup>3</sup>S<sup>3</sup>), Johannes Kepler University, Linz, Austria

Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland

KTH Learning Laboratory, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden

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Roehampton University, London, United Kingdom  
Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), London, United Kingdom  
Sofia University, Sofia , Bulgaria

### **Contact Person**

Jo Granger  
University of Surrey Roehampton  
HERN Project  
c/o Principal's Office  
Digby Stuart College  
Roehampton Lane  
SW15 5PH  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 20 8393 3204

Fax: +44 20 8392 3231

Email: [j.granger@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:j.granger@roehampton.ac.uk)

### **(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on Quality provision in cross-border higher education: Third draft meeting, OECD HQ, Paris, 17/18 January 2005.

<sup>2</sup>

Van Damme, D., (2002); "Quality Assurance in an International Environment: National and International Interests and Tensions"; CHEA International Seminar III, Jan 24, 2002, San Francisco, USA.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p 14