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Getting to grips with implementing the Bologna reforms: can we be more than the sum of our parts?

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Introduction

This conference focuses on the role of Higher Education institutions in making the goals of the Bologna process a reality. Certainly it is a well chosen theme for if institutions are unwilling or, for one reason or another, unable to engage with the changes that the Bologna process signals, we have travelled (and indeed travailed) in vain. More than that, however, we will have lost an opportunity that would benefit us all.

It needs to be recognised that Higher Education institutions are not strangers to change nor indeed have they survived so remarkably and so long without absorbing and adapting to the vagaries of governments that come and go, to the massive changes in social mores, to employment markets that require skills and knowledge bases that themselves change at rapid paces – and a host of other factors. Many of the paradigm shifts that occur in whole disciplines, many of the policy shifts that reconfigure social movements have their genesis in the halls of academe.

Universities are also being pressed upon by three of the main driving forces of our time. One is the growing demand for social justice, with access to education promoting upward social mobility. As a society becomes more democratic its citizens exercise their rights to education. This puts enormous pressure on the public purse and indeed forces us all to consider new and less expensive models of education.

The other forces can be roughly categorised as the knowledge economy and globalisation – both fuelled by technology. Kevin Kelly in his book, *New Rules for the New Economy*, describes the effects of globalisation as fuelling a new knowledge economy which represents a "tectonic upheaval in our commonwealth". The technology which once progressed at "the periphery of culture," he says, "now engulfs our minds as well as our lives." (Page 1). This has had a profound difference on Higher Education. The knowledge economy has not only created a vast and growing need for education but also for education at many stages of one's life. It has changed the very nature of the endeavour spawning the phrase 'life long learning' and turning education, at the same time, into a very large and competitive business – a business that attracts many players, both in the private and public sector, a business that, with the benefits of technology, is no longer bound by physical infrastructure and therefore national borders, and spawned a further phrase sent to intrigue or haunt us – 'borderless education'. The limits of both time and space have gone.

As early as 1991, Robert B. Reich warned that technological transformation "will rearrange the politics and economics of the coming century" - there will be no national products or technologies, no national corporations, no national industries. "All that will remain rooted within national borders are the people who (have agreed to) comprise a nation. Each nation's primary assets will be its citizens' skills and insights. Each nation's primary political task will be to cope with the centrifugal forces of the global economy which tear at the ties binding citizens - bestowing greater wealth on the most skilled and insightful, while consigning the less skilled to a declining standard of living. As borders become more meaningless, those citizens best positioned to thrive in the world market are tempted to slip the bonds of national allegiance." (Page 3) Education is a particularly striking example of this.

Mobility, it seems, is the name of the game. Indeed it is one of the large social trends of our time and its implications are ones with which governments and universities have to engage. These are the kind of issues that remind one of Daniel Bell's comment that nation states are too small for the big problems of the world and too big for the small problems. They reinforce the relevance of the Bologna process.

The Bologna process: promoting mobility and brand

As one comes to grips with how the BP has progressed it is clear that while the different goals have been broken down for convenience and indeed they interlock, there are two very stark and bold themes: mobility and brand.

1. Mobility. Comparable degree frameworks promote mobility. Comparable degrees mean that we have to have quality assurance systems, at institution-level, at country level and at an across-the-system level; we have to have two main degree cycles; we have to have a system of transferable credits.

2. Brand. The document entitled 'The Role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge' published by the Commission in February of this year recognises the growing global marketplace for knowledge and more skilled citizens. It calls for more integration across borders, for greater quality in spite of greater volumes and for more integration with industry and more partnerships between institutions. None of these imperatives is unique to Europe. But the challenge for the EU is to embed and develop this unique process of melding national and regional systems within a European framework, securing general advantage by finding the common interest of all.

What makes this agenda unique? Of course, it is the same uniqueness of a European Union which is both intra-governmental and supra-governmental. But there is a new dimension. It is its attempt to create what marketing experts would call a 'brand' – a brand essentially European and a brand labelled 'The Europe of Knowledge'. The success of the brand would be measured against its goal "for the EU to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion." Such a 'corporate' brand is built on the idea that we can be more than the sum of our parts, that acting together we can build something that individually we cannot.

I am no expert on branding but I do wonder if we have a winner here – in name terms rather than concept terms. I find myself pondering a branding campaign that promotes an Africa of Knowledge or an Asia of Knowledge or a Latin-America of Knowledge and it doesn't sit well with the inherent and intrinsic concept of knowledge itself – which, by definition surely, has no geographic home. I am led to the conclusion that we should seek a more powerful and persuasive descriptor.

But I do not, however, want to detract from the underlying 'big idea' that if we could get the universities of the European Union to buy into the vision of promoting a system and a brand which stands for some things which can be described and guaranteed, then we would have a competitive edge in the global marketplace in which students from all over the world are shopping. Not only that, but local students would have a consistent and compatible system would give them certain guarantees. Employers too would be assisted by such a system as they try to attach value to the qualifications of their employees and potential employees. Staff would be better off in the sense of having more opportunities. Let me emphasise the qualities that a good brand would demand.

1. It would demand a certain quality – and we know that the Bologna process has set in train a whole raft of agreements that would place quality within certain frameworks and give students and others assurances in this regard.
2. It would imply a subscription to democratic values which has implications for the governance structures of the university. It would not only have consequences for how institutions act within their hallowed halls but how they interact with the communities within which they are sustained, with the community of universities of which they are a part, with the particular government on which they rely for part or all of their funding. These are non-trivial issues in a world where not all of us have the luxury of academic freedom (in the best sense of the word) and not all of us live in democracies which function as we would expect. It will be important to thrash out these issues and arrive at a framework which is helpful and not an impediment to change.
3. It would mean that a person coming into the community of universities sharing this brand would be assured of an environment which is promoting the multicultural, multi-lingual, diverse, encouraging of pluralism and networked in a way that makes it possible to move between its members and have one's courses and achievements to date recognised, documented on a transcript and transferable. It would be a brand that specifically implied diversity. It would also mean that universities have demonstrable ways of contributing to what the EU has called 'social cohesion' – a role to which I would hope all universities have long aspired.
4. It would mean that staff would have mobility in this environment and a student could expect to have a reasonably diverse staff body in any one place as well as access to staff in geographically disparate places by virtue of the extensive use of technology.
5. It would mean that institutions associating themselves with this brand would offer staff and research students better teaching and research opportunities than they would expect to be offered, by and large, by other universities outside the system.
6. It would mean that students would be assured that universities of this brand would have "an improved consideration of the social dimension of students' needs" (and this would include their employability needs). They would offer courses of varying lengths, in varying modes which would

accommodate life long learning and students needing to study for different purposes at different times of their lives.

7. It would mean the institutions that embraced this brand would accept higher education to be a public good as well as a public responsibility – and accept the social responsibilities that flow from such a proposition.

Even a superficial understanding of education and educational processes would indicate that to make such propositions match the reality of institutions across a very diverse system represents an extremely ambitious project. It is so ambitious that it would represent nothing less than a transformation of the system as we now know it. Perhaps for some institutions it will be easier than others – but the term is relative. Transformations are not easily achieved. How might they be assisted?

What are the pedagogical issues?

We need to bear in mind that this transformation would not be undertaken in a system which can stay the same size. Most of the nations of Europe are already committed to expansion of higher education. This is a laudable and necessary goal but inevitably exposes issues of so-called 'massification'. The 'divide' between elite and mass institutions inevitably focuses attention on quality and equity. It is this context that presents one of the challenges to the Bologna process. Expanding a system born of the ancient universities of Europe so as to make it relevant to the diverse needs of an ever larger and more disparate body of students would expose real issues such as widening participation, achieving good student completion rates among those with no tradition of university education and changing institutions to better reflect and thus deal with the cultural diversity of modern, highly mobile, society. There are real pedagogical issues here – and they are issues that have to be addressed by the academic community, the very community which is least aware (so the research tells us) of the Bologna process and what it implies. I will list just some of the issues.

1. E-learning. Many assume that we have found in e-learning the Holy Grail to solve all our educational needs. We cannot afford to build physical infrastructure to accommodate larger numbers of students but we can employ technology. We know that we can reach many people, in many places, at any time, at relatively low cost. But this supposed solution comes with a serious caveat. That caveat is prompted by the way in which the poor quality of much of the material that we find on the Web postures as education. If we are serious about a system where students have some guarantees of quality and therefore transportability of their achievements then we must also be serious about promoting that quality for all modes of study. It has been demonstrated (Thorpe, Laurillard and others) that “transformations in the nature and the scale of activities made feasible by on-line teaching are generating widespread change in pedagogies and learning communities” and, interestingly, are clearly manifest in both large and small-scale variants of ODL. (Thorpe, page 209)

Learning through the use of the so-called knowledge media is an altogether different way of learning. Indeed one of the most remarkable transformations wrought by the technology is the change in the value relationships between skills and knowledge. “Where once skills were incidental to the knowledge base, now the knowledge has become incidental to the skills base” (Hills, page 220).

Attempts to understand how students learn and use the knowledge media in constructive and purposeful ways include research into a whole range of innovative approaches to sharing, accessing and understanding knowledge so that we may share it and pass it on. If we are serious about building a Europe where people can learn at any time, by any mode, according to their needs, then we also need to be serious about allocating time and research monies to this effort. I am pleased to note that the Commissioner for the eLearning programme for 2004-6 promises to make a major difference in its sphere. The so-called e-Bologna process must be an inherent part of the exercise conceived to drive us towards our overall objective.

2. The death of time and space. As the system expands and adjusts to social and employer demand, we find a blurring of the difference between full-time and part-time study, a mix between residential and distance study and even a relaxation in the rigidity that for so long barred entry into the system. My university has no entry requirements at all – a complete commitment to widening participation and improving access. These changes are further challenged by the phenomenon of life-long learning. If ever anything emphasised the shift from teaching to learning, it is this. Institutions that wish to cling to a system which describes learning in terms of the amount of time spent on it have no place in this vast arena. We can only describe learning in terms of outcomes – and this focuses the academic mind in a way very few systems have done before. Again I emphasise that these are pedagogical issues. Meeting the learning needs of mature and experience learners is not the same as meeting those of young adults.

3. Curriculum issues. Many of the goals of the Bologna process have to do with curriculum content and not just process, however important the latter may be. Again it is academics who have to engage with this process and institutions that have to find ways of making this happen. Ironically, at a time when we are emphasising the strength of competition, it is by collaborating across the system that we are most likely to find solutions to meeting the language and cultural imperatives of what we have set ourselves to achieve. We cannot have all the resources we need within any one institution nor even is it desirable that we do. By promoting and encouraging mobility of academic staff across the system, by investing more in virtual access, by offering joint degrees – not only to people who have the means to travel but also to those who obtain the necessary quality outcomes from distance providers, we can make our local offerings to students capable of meeting the hallmarks of what I have labelled a brand. This will involve accreditation and validation exercises, among other things, and again it is the academic who will be exercised to implement these matters.

I am concentrating on those issues which are for the individual academics at the coal-face of the enterprise because we know that it is at the coalface that change is required – and most difficult to implement. There are several administrative imperatives which I believe easier to implement and there are also governance issues which will vary from country to country and be more difficult to change in some than in others. Some are features of the statutory environment and I will not pause on them here. These last few, I would venture to say, are less difficult to implement than the pedagogical interventions. It may, however, be useful to spend a short time on how change can be effected.

Implementing change – some comparisons

Radical change does not take place by stealth or osmosis – and especially in systems which have evolved over hundreds of years, in institutions which, whether or not they enjoy the descriptor, are inherently conservative. Sometimes we are faced with a paradox that our greatest strength in a particular situation is also our greatest weakness. The strength of our heritage in Europe in higher education may itself be a problem. Much more is at risk for us in changing things than is the case in younger communities. There are some interesting comparisons to be made with other regions.

I was intimately involved in the transformation of the South African system so let me use it as an example. I do not have the time to ponder the reasons why South Africa managed to transfer power from one group to another without first enduring a civil war (and the reasons are instructive indeed) but what is clear is that people only change either if they can be persuaded that they have no choice (legal or other) or if the incentives are irresistible. The conditions by which they arrive at such conclusions usually require intense reflection and exposure to worldviews other than their own.

Higher Education in South Africa went through such a period of intense reflection both as a system and at an institutional level. Institutions were variable in their engagement. At my own university at the time we embarked on a series of intense dialogues with communities and stakeholders that universities have not traditionally regarded as partners. And it was the interaction of outsiders with insiders that resulted in the acceptance of change. That, and determined leadership.

It seems to me that the ability and will to engage will be the decisive attributes of those institutions that are going to provide the critical mass needed to create this European Higher Education Area and this concept of a Europe of Knowledge. I would recommend to you the Association of Commonwealth Universities' document entitled "Engagement as a Core Value for the University." It makes the point that "21st century academic life is no longer pursued in seclusion (if it ever was) but must rather champion reason and imagination in engagement with the wider society and its concerns." It goes on to assert that "engagement implies strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world." (Page i)

The ACU document reaffirms that in a society defined as a knowledge society, institutions must conceive of themselves in much broader terms, cosmopolitan terms; it means also that it is no longer possible to have all that you need to know within anyone institution; it means enlarging the number of partners and collaborations and making the borders of the institution as porous as possible.

It is not bureaucracy or even legislation alone that brings about change. It is a combination of factors which essentially mean that all parties essential to the change share a common vision. We know from the research that most academics on the ground have not the vaguest idea of the grand plans conceived in Bologna, Lisbon, Barcelona or Prague – yet it is they who need to undertake the implementation at the level of the detail that is clearly required. Institutional leadership will be severely tested through this time and it would be helpful for us to keep monitoring the attributes of those institutions which are more successful so that we can all learn from them. Burton Clark writes that "demands on universities outrun their capacity to respond" (page 129) and the task is beyond the

individual capacity of the internal faculties and their staff alone. Institutions have to find systemic capacity to steer themselves in this highly complex world of often conflicting demands. His study of five European universities which have found a way through this complexity is worthy of consideration – but it clearly demonstrates that this is not an exercise achieved over a short period of time.

One powerful lever for change is, of course, financial incentive. This is very directly covered in the Trends 111 document; “Financing provides the fuel which helps to ignite and to support the necessary reforms at institutional level.” (Paragraph 3.2.1) What we also know, however, is that the changes envisioned by the Bologna process are going to require investment, whichever way we look at it. Buried in the report is a telling comment: “The ministers of education have signed a declaration in 1999 (and confirmed in 2001) which implies considerable increases of investment in teaching and learning. These implications are only beginning to become evident at a time when many education ministries in Europe are struggling to maintain current funding levels, let alone to meet the aims and funding targets set for the research dimension of higher education by their heads of governments in Lisbon and Barcelona in 2002.” (Paragraph 3.2.1) This is a challenge indeed.

A consideration of access and especially access that promotes mobility at sub-degree level cannot be divorced from the financial constraints that inhibit many if not most of our students from taking advantage of the benefits of the system we are so enthusiastically promoting. The ‘Trends 111’ document is also emphatic that “the most decisive obstacle to mobility lies in insufficient means to pay for the additional mobility costs incurred, even if mobility grants are provided.” (Paragraph 4.2.1) Reference is also made to the “locally based commitments such as part-time work positions, family obligations, rent and other financial obligations.” We need to grapple with this reality and modify our expectations or stand accused of creating a system of ever larger gulfs between the rich and poor. At the same time we need to be careful that we are not paralysed by these obstacles. The bottom line must be that all students, from whatever financial background, would be better off with degrees that travel well and are recognised across a large geographic area.

Conclusion

Is this all too difficult and therefore an excuse for throwing up our hands and going home? I am afraid not – because the necessary reforms I have touched on are attempting to respond to the realities of the new world, to real and discernable trends that have to be accommodated one way or another. They point to a world where together we may be able to preserve the best of what we now have and share it amongst more. They point to a world where the benefits of technology can be leveraged. They point to a world where universities will not be left behind like some relics of a lost age – but will rather lead and value that which benefits the greatest number. There clearly is a case for investment in making this happen, in providing incentives and steers, but the incentives should be seen as investments which, by definition, lead to greater benefits in the future.

The documents to which our governments and associations have signed up do have action plans (“lines”) and they roughly correlate with the seven attributes that I have outlined above. They provide a checklist for the managers of institutions to use in measuring their own institution’s progress

towards being able to be a full partner in the European Higher Education Area. These are all challenging, even daunting and they cannot be achieved if our own staff are not fully engaged in the project. The task begins on our campuses – with us, where it should be. Governments have their role to play and indeed are necessary and valuable partners in the endeavour but there are some things that governments cannot do – and that is a reality. Those of us here today must believe that education is a key to the places that politicians and economists just can't reach.

I conclude with a quote from Ron Barnett's excellent book entitled *Beyond all Reason*: "The university remains an extraordinary institution," he says. "A higher education system that educates upwards of forty per cent of the population cannot be what it was when it educated, say, less than fifteen per cent. It can be much more. Its scale, its reach into society, the intermingling of its knowledges with those of the wider world and the wider forms of human being that it promotes are already enabling it to be much more. But it can be even more still." (Page 173) Just as the EU is more than the sum of its regions and states, so also can we universities be more than the sum of our parts. Ladies and gentlemen, I share Barnett's hope and I trust you can as well.

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