

Report from Seminar for Bologna and Higher Education Reform Experts, Nicosia, Cyprus, November 22-24

The Higher education reform experts seminar, held in Nicosia in organization of European Commission, TEMPUS, UNICA, University of Cyprus, Brussels Education Service and European Office Cyprus, brought together national experts, professors, students, policy makers in order to focus on social dimension. Collectively the participants provided background information, policy updates through created open space discussions related to the topics of interests. The open space methodology is the best way of expressing provoking presentations and good opportunity for all participants to contribute to understanding and managing issues concerning social dimension. This way of working highlights the issues and solves problems using open approach of all participants. My impression was that open space created an environment where everyone could contribute to seminar and got most from the meeting.

Social dimension, as the main topic of the seminar, aimed to equality of opportunities in higher education in terms of access, participation and successful completion of studies, studying and living conditions, guidance and counseling, financial support and student participation in higher education. All of the participants emphasized the fact that mobility, removing barriers and providing incentives contribute enhancing the quality, attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area.

Also, very important message of the seminar is that all countries are obliged to provide an opportunity for all groups in particular for those who belong to so called underrepresented to complete appropriate higher education. There are many reasons to be part of this group as gender question, ethnic origin, nationality, age, income level, disability, family background (family tradition), geographical location, earlier education disadvantage. Even in so called developed countries there are many members of society who are excluded from higher education potentially based on noted reasons. In this circumstance the great role lies at HEIs to improve the situation and also at Bologna and Tempus experts to play advising institutions on methods and procedures in designing smooth pathway into, through and out of higher education. Some of the participants stressed their opinion that widening access to higher education enhances the quality of education in at least three major ways: intellectually through the diversity of ideas, morally through the concept of an egalitarian society and pragmatically-widening access is good for business. This

opinion is not usual by many within academia who consider that widening access leads to reduction of quality of the education, or erosion of quality with negative effects on reputation and lower ranking. Stressing that quality is always relative and measured against norms involved standards are either perceived or imagined. So, it is of importance that the institutions themselves develop and maintain a proactive approach to the community. Taking into account the fact that Europe's future depends on its 100 million young people and that by 2020 35% of all jobs will require high level qualification, at all countries and HEIs lie the great responsibility to enable widening access to higher education and develop flexible policies to increase completion rate. At the same time HEIs have to offer appropriate programs of study which satisfy labor market needs. All of participants agreed that all HEIs could enable easily extension of study, lower fees and psychological support system in place. Also, we have to give answers and change the reality of statistics which show that less than 20% of young disadvantaged areas enter HE while more than 50% of young people from advantaged areas enter HE. What about special arrangements for blind or low sight students and students with hearing problems?

One of the most important challenges of this seminar was developing and implementing of LLL strategy and recognition of prior learning and general policy regarding the role of universities in it. Special attention must be devoted to curriculum, its content and structure and to the process of bridging and foundation of programs for so called non- traditional students. Introduction of LLL means preparing of academic staff to meet different types of students, better partnership with industry, providing social services, flexible education, existing of part time students as well as work based routes in every system, political ambitions of policy makers achievable through flexible LLL provision, support to universities in developing and enhancing LLL strategy, dissemination of LLL, sustainable funding, links to alumni.

In order to achieve these goals it would be very useful to set up European Observatory on the social dimension which will provide help to HEIs in categorizing initiatives leading to common goals or measures and support standardized monitoring.

Participation and working in WGs were very useful for all participants bearing in mind their topics related to targeted recruitment campaigns, widening access, recognition of prior learning and informal learning, community engagement. All of participants gave their own approach to these themes depending on situation in these areas in their countries. It was not possible to claim general approach due to

various degrees of implementation of all discussed issues. Relatively small number of countries have well established system of recognition of prior learning. Mainly, there is no recognition of learning undertaken outside the formal education system. It expressed concerns to slow progress of NQF developing in many European countries. As all of topics are common concerning, all participated countries are recommended to establish network in order to share experience and support. It is also stressed that state was obliged to prepare strategy for RPL implementation, not universities themselves.

The most responsible actors in education processes are HEIs, but with respective support of all stakeholders and overall society.

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