

TUNING EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURES IN EUROPE

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"The TUNING project in the context of main trends in higher education in Europe"

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues in European higher education,

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to express my views about the role of the TUNING project in the light of the main trends in European higher education as it moves towards convergence reforms within the framework of the Bologna process.

Welcome, TUNING !

The first point I wish to make today is that I very much welcome the TUNING project. There are at least six good reasons for this.

- The first reason why I welcome TUNING is because it could not be more timely. We are about to complete a crucial first stage of the Bologna process, which will need fresh impetus and a set of new directions after the Salamanca Convention of higher education institutions in March and the upcoming meeting of the Ministers in Prague later this month. One key change which I think can be forecast for the next phase of the process is that progress will increasingly happen across borders within broad subject areas rather than across subjects within the traditional but limited framework of national systems. Work within subject areas will take on paramount importance for the development of compatible qualifications in the emerging European higher education area. The kind of very concrete steps which are now needed for the definition of qualifications (in terms of level descriptors, credits and core competencies/skills) as well as for quality assurance/accreditation will only be possible within given subject or professional areas – even though such progress may need to be fostered,

eased or even authorised at the level of whole institutions or national systems.

- Another reason for welcoming TUNING is that it builds on the experience already acquired by the main actors involved in the setting up of the European higher education area. TUNING should be able to draw on tools like the Diploma Supplement or ECTS, on expertise with activities like joint curricular development and on existing networks of acquainted partners like the Thematic Networks. This is to me just one more piece of evidence that the Bologna Declaration is both a consequence of, and a contribution to the growing together of European higher education. The Declaration's role has been to set out a framework of goals and principles; these have just been re-confirmed in the clearest possible way by higher education institutions in Salamanca, and should Ministers are expected to express their standing commitment to the process when they meet in Prague. There is a sound basis for TUNING to take the process further in its area of interest.
- This is related to the third reason why I welcome the TUNING project: it should favour a process of mutual reinforcement with the broader Bologna process of convergence. In the short time since the Bologna Conference of 2 years ago, a lot has already been achieved : increased awareness of the need and reasons for overall change, broad consensus on the key objectives and main action lines of the Bologna agenda, examples of reforms in degree structure and curriculum renovation in all subject areas, resulting in some kind of "acquis universitaire" which can now serve as a platform for further developments. Maybe the best example of this is the breakthrough achieved at the Helsinki Seminar on Bachelor-type degrees, where an consensus could be found that these degrees should be no less than 180 and no more than 240 ECTS points and should be available in a great diversity of orientations from universities and other types of higher education institutions. In turn, progress achieved in the subject areas covered by TUNING will be ploughed back into the broader process and will thus add new reasons for convergent change/reforms at institutions and in countries not yet involved to the same degree as others. The whole process progresses through this snowballing effect, and TUNING is part of the dynamics in it.
- The fourth reason for welcoming TUNING is that it is clearly skewed towards competencies, skills and the employability dimension of higher education. European higher education needs to take steps in this direction, in order to close what I elsewhere called its "relevance gap" with respect to e.g. U.S. universities. European society can no longer afford, and is no longer prepared to accept, the combination of over-long study programmes, graduate unemployment and skill shortages in key areas. Taking steps in the

direction of enhanced employability of graduates does of course not mean that all curricula should train students for immediate entrance into a well-defined professional occupation or that courses should be geared mainly towards short term needs on the labour market. The right approach is likely to emphasise "lasting employability" in a lifelong learning perspective, transversal skills required for nearly all types of professional activities, and the "core competencies" require from professionals in a given area, irrespective of the national/institutional differences in study programmes. Another important aspect to which TUNING should be able to contribute is the recognition that "employability" now refers to the European, rather than the local or national labour market. Most national reform schemes within the Bologna process stress the renewed importance and the broader meaning of employability (e.g. in the new Italian degree structure) and it is also interesting to point out that the major EU programmes in higher education are also moving in this direction (in particular through the development of the Grundtvig strand of the SOCRATES programme).

- Fifth, TUNING is putting emphasis on curriculum development and renovation, a crucial activity without which nothing real and lasting may be achieved to make European higher education more cohesive, efficient, compatible and competitive. TUNING will require curricular change in all the subject areas concerned and from all participating institutions, and will entice change in other areas and at other universities. At the same time as underlying the vital need of this exercise TUNING is also likely to contribute to making the change process more efficient: there is no need to re-invent the wheel at each faculty, sharing of best-practice and learning from each other are powerful tools in this process. Here I am thinking of the "Greifswald Model" in Germany or of the new comprehensive Colleges in the Netherlands, which provide good examples of broad-based, fully redeveloped Bachelor curricula adding transversal skills to non-professional disciplines.
- A sixth and final reason why I welcome TUNING is because of the determined support which it receives from the European Commission. The position of the Commission in the Bologna process has certainly not always been very comfortable over the last two years, but its actual role has been of vital importance. From the point of view of universities and higher education in general, the European Commission has been a major partner for innovation, openness and reaching beyond traditional national limitations. The Commission has its own reasons for supporting the Bologna process and I have no doubt that its contribution will be acknowledged and that new demands will be put to it concerning both the "internal" (i.e. intra-European) and "external" aspects of the process. It is good that TUNING will be able to develop thanks to a grant from the European Commission, and it is good that

actors in the Bologna process are aware that the project could not have taken off without it.

Tuning in context : factors of success

Let me now turn towards another aspect, which I think should also be emphasised today at this launching event of TUNING. I would like to point out some key factors of success for the project, and in doing so I would also like to draw the attention of project managers and participants to certain aspects whose importance may not be conspicuously clear at this early stage. I have grouped my observations around four factors which I see as the key determinants of success.

- A first important factor of TUNING is, in my view, that it ought not to lose sight of the broader picture. The five main disciplines selected for the project are important and were well chosen, but I also welcome the intention to bring in other, "associate" disciplines. The project should always think of bridges between the university sector and other institutions of higher education. In the spirit of lifelong learning and in full agreement with the planned development of the Grundtvig scheme, the qualification structure should be built on the basis of multiple entry and exit points – a topic which was stressed with particular emphasis during the Salamanca Convention. In the same way, not to lose sight of the overall picture requires that comparisons and references should not be limited to European systems only, but should consistently draw also on data and experience from other major actors in world higher education, in particular the USA: the worldwide acceptance of the newly defined degrees should receive the highest degree of attention. Finally and conversely, it will be important for TUNING to always think of the whole of Europe, not only of current and applicant EU countries, but also of e.g. Southeast Europe, in order to be certain to set directions and design patterns which will sooner or later be seen as suitable in all systems.
- A second aspect which I see as crucial is that TUNING should focus its efforts on the main articulation of the degree structure, i.e. on the Bachelor/Master system. There I think TUNING has the potential, and also the responsibility, to strive for agreement on very concrete definitions and concepts. In particular, the project should be able to define the minimal requirements for Bachelor and Master degrees in the various subject areas. The agreement reached in Helsinki on Bachelor degrees requiring 180-240 credits provides a starting point; but there remains a lot to be done, e.g. concerning the various profiles of "ordinary" and "advanced" Honours degrees or the nomenclature of degrees/qualifications (in their translation

into English if not in their national language). I would also like to stress that TUNING should under no circumstance move away from the main articulation of studies in two main phases (i.e. undergraduate and graduate) as requested in the Bologna Declaration. While it has in the meantime been emphasised that the process is voluntary and that under certain circumstances certain universities may want to stick to their long, one-tier courses in a particular field, this should be seen as exceptions, which I see mainly as temporary by nature (except probably for medicine and a few other professions for which there is a specific directive ensuring their professional recognition throughout the EU). Tuning should support change in the direction of two-tier qualifications, and build on the efforts of those institutions or faculties in all disciplines who have already acknowledged the benefits of a two-tier system of degrees.

- Thirdly, I think TUNING should be clear that in order to be successful it will need to be as prescriptive as necessary, but not more. While it is part of political correctness in Europe to always present diversity as an asset, this diversity is not always positively received when it comes to recognising degrees or modules acquired in another European country. Diversity is not chaos. It is an asset if students and employers can benefit from it; but becomes a liability if it is used as a means to avoid change and perpetuate closed-shop, not transparent practices. In other words, diversity needs to be transparent and organised, as was expressed very clearly in the Salamanca Convention. Managers of the TUNING project should be encouraged by some findings of the Trends II report: the need for more coordination felt in the field is at least as strong as the fear of uniformisation, even though it may not yet be expressed as openly. Time has come to respond to the demand for clear guidelines on key aspects, in order to avoid that too volatile definitions of credits or degrees undermines the efforts towards more overall coherence. My clear impression is that at this stage colleagues and institutions are more anxious to know what the future standards will be than they are concerned about imposed uniformisation which no one ever proposed. In the same way, while a degree nomenclature (in the form of an agreement on the best translation into English of national degrees) may be discussed endlessly, progress will accelerate once there is a concrete proposal on the table – an initiative which TUNING may have to take in the future. Beyond this indispensable level of cohesiveness in core requirements and nomenclatures, everything else should be left to universities to profile their own curricula. Diversity and transparency are not contradictory concepts. Many reform plans have taken steps to reconcile them (e.g. in Italy through framework requirements in disciplinary "classes" combined with a considerable degree of freedom for universities to profile their curricula). The very constraining "lists of fields of specialisation" which exist in a number of countries are

examples of over-regulation inhibiting innovation and standing in the way of the development of the kind of broad-based, multidisciplinary qualifications envisaged by the Bologna Declaration.

- Finally I would like to stress that in order to be successful TUNING will need to pay enough attention to the "external" aspects of the Bologna process, in particular to the international attractiveness and the worldwide acceptance of European degrees. A main background consideration should always be that European degrees will not be generally accepted in the world if they are not first generally accepted in Europe itself. Compatibility cannot be fostered in isolation, and the long term success of the Bologna process will be dependent on its ability to increase the attractiveness of European higher education at home, in Europe and in the world. This will no doubt bear on decisions about how best to structure European qualifications in each main subject area.

Operational suggestions

To conclude this presentation I would like to hint to some more operational aspects on which managers and participants of the project will most probably have to take a position while implementing t TUNING.

The most important remark in this respect is that TUNING has the potential to be much more than just a debate or an exchange of information. For convergence to appear in a given subject area it is not enough to know about good (or not so good) practice at various institutions or in various countries. Nor is stock-taking of reasons why there is not more already more convergence (sometimes we know the reasons all well...). Tuning is not for observation and discussion, it is for action. This entails an operational principle that, while the broadest possible consensus should be sought, TUNING should be prepared that there will not always be unanimity; not everyone can, is willing or needs to move at the same time and the same pace; what matters is that the others are not prevented from moving.

A related, fundamental point is that within the framework of a project like TUNING the issue of diversity is bound to come up nearly all the time. Those involved in the project should in my view be aware that the politically correct discourse about diversity is far too often used as an excuse for inaction or for the protection of inefficient situations. In higher education diversity is often praised in public as an invaluable asset which has only positive aspects, and then used as a means to rule out the recognition of everything which is not exactly similar to

the home model. There is a difference between conscious diversity and chaos. For diversity to become the enormous asset it may indeed be, students, institutions and employers alike need enough transparency and organisation to be able to effectively benefit from it rather than to risk penalisation or exclusion. This is of vital importance for TUNING, the European Higher Education Area and indeed for Europe as a whole.

Another important, often under-estimated aspect is communication. I think that one characteristic of the higher education community is that it tends to believe that quality is self-sufficient, that as soon as it is provided it is recognised and translates automatically into appreciation. The reality is of course much more complex and often leads to frustration when individuals or institutions seen as offering nothing better are preferred because they made themselves known through communication efforts. In the same way it will not be enough for TUNING to do its own job well. The project is big and complex and information and communication will be a major challenge which should receive due attention. One particular important aspect of this is the need, as I see it, to keep other important actors informed and involved in the project operations and achievements; I am thinking in particular of the follow-up groups to the Prague meeting, the European University Association (EUA) and the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). These are natural partners of the project and if properly informed they will also become vectors of positive information on TUNING. Their participation in the project's board is of course very useful, but not sufficient in itself. Communication needs to be on a broader scale, and I think it will be essential for TUNING's future development and recognition.

The final operational suggestion I would like to make is related, in a broader sense, to the role of universities and higher education institutions and organisations in the Bologna process of convergence. The Trends II report noted that in reform countries change came with more, not less autonomy of universities. The Message of Salamanca sent to Ministers by higher education institutions stresses their willingness and ability to initiate change and "shape their win future", provided they have the necessary freedom to do so. TUNING is a project that could demonstrate this. There is a lot universities can do, and by doing it they are likely to earn the additional autonomy which they seek and need. In line with the Salamanca Message, TUNING can help universities acknowledge the need and reasons for change (growing accountability, increased student choice, more competition), prepare them to re-organise and renovate their curricula (instead of just formally complying by cutting old courses into two stages), and to put in place credible quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms valid at the level of Europe (feasible scenarios have already been sketched and should be kept in mind when working on common

denominators in each particular subject area). Cooperation with ENQA as well as with the NARIC/ENIC network will therefore be of decisive importance.

To conclude I would like to repeat here what has been my leitmotiv since my involvement with the Bologna process. Students in Europe need – and will increasingly demand – degrees which they can effectively use for the purpose of study and employment all over Europe. Universities, together with governments, must make all the necessary changes in order to empower themselves to award this type of degrees to their graduates. Those who do will prosper, those who don't will suffer. This has been recognised in the Salamanca Message, and is likely to be taken up also by Ministers when they meet in Prague in two weeks. Progress in this direction will mostly happen in subject-based work cutting across national and institutional borders, and I therefore suggest this concern could also serve as a main guiding principle for the TUNING project.

I wish the project all the success. I am convinced that those who initiated it and all those who will implement TUNING want to make a decisive contribution to the creation of the European Higher Education Area and are in a position to do so.

Thank you for your attention.