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**A Barometer of Change: Celebrating Achievements and
Identifying the Challenges for a New Era in Higher Education**

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INTRODUCTION

Back to the Future: Introduction and Reflection by the Editor

PETER J. WELLS

As the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, and the perfect vision of the year 2020 becomes the new vogue benchmark, so higher education in Europe too marks the passing of a milestone and the realization of a much anticipated landmark. On 1 January 2010 the ‘European Higher Education Area’ will be officially unveiled, bringing with it a true sense of accomplishment together with perhaps a sprinkling of apprehension as to what version of the new reality to expect. This reality may well be, if not an anti-climax, then at the very least a variant ‘business-as-usual’ bewilderment. However, as the hangovers of euphoria and trumpeting subside, it will be ‘back to business’, as policy-makers and stakeholders of higher education begin the process of building on achievements and following-through on commitments towards the quality enhancement of their higher education institutions and systems. The 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve *Communiqué of the Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the European Region*, also looked to the future in the context of the nouveau colloquial vernacular of “Bologna 2020”:

In the decade up to 2020 European higher education has a vital contribution to make in realizing a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative. Faced with the challenge of an ageing population Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximizes the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education. ...European higher education also faces the major challenge and the ensuing opportunities of globalization and accelerated technological developments with new providers, new learners and new types of learning. Student-centred learning and mobility will help students develop the competences they need in a changing labour market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens. (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009)

However, the Bologna Process has not only had a decisive impact on the forty-six countries committed to its implementation, but also on other areas of the world; an interest which has ranged from mild curiosity to a stated desire to mirror the Process in a multinational context. This global-dimensional impact was accordingly recognized by the ‘Bologna 46’ at the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve conference, prompting the first “Bologna Policy Forum” designed to facilitate a global dialogue with twenty non-Bologna signatory countries. The attention that the Bologna reforms have attracted is hardly surprising, given that almost universally all higher education systems, their institutions,

students and professionals have, or are faced with, at least some of the challenges that the Bologna Declaration and subsequent Process set out to address.

At the end of 2009, it is no longer presumptuous to link the Bologna project to a sort of new global *Magna Charta* for higher education. The world has come a long way since the signing of the original Magna Charta in Runnymede, and the world of higher education has travelled equally far from the days since the *Magna Charta Universitatum* in Bologna in 1988, yet, in order for both to stand the test of time, they have had to be revisited and continually re-evaluated in the contexts of current developments and practicalities. This double issue of *Higher Education in Europe* can thus, on many levels, be seen as a celebration of achievements and a work plan for the future in equal measure.

Comparing the topical issues presented in this issue with past topics is as good as any methodology in judging how far we have come. Many of the topics addressed in this issue – university rankings; cross-border studies; benchmarking; emotional competencies – were barely in the lexicon of higher education a mere twenty years ago, let alone priority discussion points on higher education institutional agendas. Even the term ‘management’ was still only a business concept in higher education circles for much of the 1990s. Today, however, the term is accepted (if somewhat guardedly) as a sign of the times in university leadership and development, with quality assurance management, human resources management, budgetary management, student learning management, learning resource management, etc. being almost *de rigueur*.

Yet, at the same time it is surprising – perhaps even troublesome – to observe how many papers in this issue deal with recurring topics from the past. Sifting through the archives of past issues of *Higher Education in Europe* over the past twenty-five years reveals that there is conceivably ‘nothing new under the sun’ even in the problematic of tertiary learning:

- *Performance Evaluation of Teachers and Students* (1983, no. 2)
- *Distance Higher Education – Experiences and Evaluation* (1983, no. 3)
- *The Changing Role and Status of Post-Secondary Teachers* (1985, no. 2)
- *Higher Education and International Mobility* (1986, no. 1)
- *Excellence in Higher Education* (1987, no. 4)
- *Diversification of Higher Education* (1988, nos. 1–2)
- *Study Choices and Learning Styles of Students* (1988, no. 4)
- *Inter-university Exchanges as an Instrument for the Internationalization of Higher Education* (1990, no. 1)
- *Universities as Centres of Lifelong Education* (1991, no. 1)
- *The Internationalization of Higher Education* (1991, no. 2)
- *Higher Education and the One-Europe Concept* (1991, no. 4)
- *Career Patterns in Research and Development: Conditions and Perspectives* (1992, no. 2)
- *Higher Education and the Labour Market* (1993, no. 2)
- *Quality Assurance and Institutional Accreditation in European Higher Education* (1995, nos. 1–2)
- *Higher Education and Employment* (1997, no. 4)

In selecting just one example from the current issue of a revisionist return to the past, the empirical research documented by Aittola et al. in the opening article illustrates how the nature and perception of ‘internationalization’ is still as unclear today as it was nearly twenty years earlier. The authors, however, do make an interesting distinction

between prior discussions on the subject and those happening in 2009, concluding that Italian institutions and academics have always been ‘internationalized’, but it is the Bologna Process which has forced them to take it more seriously. A sentiment which may help to answer the question of why so many dynamics in higher education continue to resurface, and at the same time might just vindicate the Bologna Process to its critics.

The other papers and Tribune articles presented in the current issue also offer a Janus-like examination of old topics within a new modern context; for some they represent ‘un-finished business’; for others, areas of improvement; and for yet others, the beginning of a long journey. However, all of them would not have surfaced at all if it were not for the extensive commitment and research of the individuals that went before them. They and their predecessors constitute the most important barometer of progress.

As highlighted earlier, *Higher Education in Europe* has in many ways been the document of change over time. It has witnessed and recorded for prosperity the key issues, debates, arguments, rebuttals and successes that higher education has experienced and lived through for more than a generation – from the restrictive regimes of a closed Eastern Europe, to the devolution of autonomy, the modern realities of massification and the new realities of student fees. As a collection of some thirty-four volumes, *Higher Education in Europe* represents as much a learning curve as does an individual student’s passage from passive to active learner in twenty-first-century pedagogy. Paradigm shifts all too often occur without us even noticing, but the longevity of *Higher Education in Europe* bares witness to such shifts for those who may wish to learn from them. In this sense, therefore, the journal too has been a constant barometer of change.

Yet, this issue of *Higher Education in Europe* marks not only the end of one era of change for higher education in Europe, but also the end of the involvement of UNESCO’s European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES) in its publication. The journal will undoubtedly continue and the stakeholders continue to be heard, albeit under new editorship and guises. For the past fifteen years the journal has been a joint publication of UNESCO-CEPES and Routledge, and many people have worked tirelessly, often behind the scenes, to ensure its quality, relevance and prestige. In particular the editor would like here to pay tribute to: the formidable talents of the journal’s former editors – Leland Conley Barrows, Daniel Lincoln, Melanie Seto, and Eric Gilder (Tribune); the professionalism of the current publications support staff at UNESCO-CEPES – Valentina Pislaru, Viorica Popa, Dan Parlea and Diana Ruff; to Ian White, our infinitely patient and understanding publisher and his dedicated team at Routledge; and to all the members of the Editorial Board (past and present) for their unwavering support.

Finally, and most importantly, UNESCO-CEPES is indebted to all the distinguished contributors who have so generously shared their research through the pages of the journal in the selfless endeavour of improving higher education, without which *Higher Education in Europe* would not be the reference point it has become.

This final collection of essays has been encapsulated under the title of ‘A Barometer of Change’, and if there were a recurrent keyword in the history of topics presented in *Higher Education in Europe* it would be ‘change’. The debates included in these pages have constructively and consistently considered whether change in higher education has been, is, or will be for the better of higher learning and society as a whole. Time alone can decide which position holds true. But one thing is assured – change will happen. In accepting this reality as we continue to debate and learn about the role and models of higher education in the twenty-first century, we might take heed from Charles Darwin’s

observation that: “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change”.

References

MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION “The Bologna Process 2020 – The European Higher Education Area in the New Decade”. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, 28–29 April, 2009.