Academic Mobility and the Role of Joint Degree Programmes

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The Bologna Declaration of 1999 committed European countries to the promotion of academic mobility. The free movement of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was meant to be achieved by overcoming a wide range of obstacles – such as funding, visa issues and recognition. Attracting more academics from outside of Europe was meant to increase the international competitiveness of the European systems of higher education.

In 2011, twelve years after the signing of the Bologna Declaration, it is time to ask what progress has been made in terms of these objectives. Obviously, the main change since 1999 has been the shift in focus from short-term credit mobility to degree mobility. Students’ degree mobility has continued to increase since the Bologna Declaration. The EHEA has been particularly successful in attracting students from outside the EHEA. Many of these new international students opted for the “old” EU countries as their study destinations. Established destinations such as the UK, Germany and France have remained as attractive as ever. In contrast, internal mobility within the EHEA shows only modest growth. In these intra-European mobility movements a clear east-to-west pattern can be detected.

Higher education policy debates throughout Europe reveal a consensus to make mobility the rule rather than the exception. In order to “mainstream” mobility in the EHEA, the main obstacles need to be overcome. Some of these barriers to academic mobility within/into the EHEA are still connected to funding, visa or recognition issues. The lack of quality assurance and missing incentives for students and staff constitute further obstacles to mobility. Last but not least, more and better data on mobility is needed (e.g. information on mobility flows, funding opportunities, motivations for being mobile and especially for not being mobile).

Joint degree programmes are, of course, most valuable instruments for promoting the European dimension of higher education. Mobility is an integral part of these programmes rather than a mere “add on” and recognition is facilitated as well. However, these programmes demand for a high level of coordination on all participating sides and, in terms of absolute numbers, they will not provide for a significant overall increase in mobility within/into the EHEA.