



Seventh Meeting of UNICA Bologna Lab Coordinators, University of Zagreb

Summary

Tour de table

The tour de table revolved around a host of issues pertaining to the rethinking of the organisation and implementation of the third cycle. Arthur Mettinger labelled the current stage of the Bologna reforms with its focus on the third cycle a transitional period, characterised by a perceptible convergence of hitherto diverse strands and scientific cultures. The coordinators agreed that the prevailing character of third cycle programmes ought to remain research-oriented. The following highlights key aspects of the tour de table, which shall be revisited with a short overview of the general tenor or particularly interesting input from the participants.

Starting from anchoring of **employability** of third cycle graduates the group discussed **relations to industry**. Hedvig Gyde Thomsen introduced the Norwegian concept of the Industrial PhD: a private company sponsoring a programme and students in turn working within this company. This issue can also be found high up on the higher education agenda of Cyprus, where collaboration with local industry has been prioritised.

ECTS remain a central issue. The system has to be applied at least for compulsory courses in Norway or in Cyprus where taught courses with a minimum ECTS range can be found. Sweden too implemented a system, which applies ECTS for course work and the thesis. Slovakia has structured programmes based on ECTS, with a scale of credits based on publications or conference participation. In contrast Austrian universities find themselves in a position where, for three year PhD programmes, they are obliged to implement QA measures, yet are under no obligation to use ECTS. For the University of Vienna Arthur Mettinger sketched the idea of one overarching framework curriculum for PhD studies which can then be filled and interpreted subject-specifically. He also envisioned PhD contracts, which would lend increased transparency and security for students. Melita Kovacevic warned of overstructuring third cycle programmes. She pledged for an economic and effective system which smoothly guides students through programmes. Key to such a notion is that students do not linger in the system longer than necessary.

The organisation of **supervision and assessment** was another hotly debated issue. The group agreed that in order to avoid conflicts of interest, supervision should be carried out in teams with a minimum amount of external supervisors.

On another crucial issue, the **organisational set-up of programmes**, Johan Falk presented an interesting suggestion. Introducing developments in his native Sweden Johan championed the idea that small countries should cluster their research expertise (as is the case in Sweden which currently runs 16 doctoral schools) in order to pool forces and remain competitive. Arthur Mettinger argued along a similar vein when he referred to 'niche' subjects, which can often be found at capital universities. He advocated the cultivation and active promotion of such 'unprofitable' gems despite the lack of critical mass and invited partners to join a concerted effort to achieve collateral non-damage.

Zdravko Lackovic pointed to current and future **challenges** when he identified three diverse pulls which all affect the development and embedding of PhD structures within a broader context. The demand to generate more PhD candidates, the need to constantly increase the quality of third cycle programmes and their graduates and finally, the new three-year structure. The consolidation of PhD programmes will have to give satisfying answers to all three.

Arthur Mettinger concluded that the UNICA Bologna Lab was ideally placed to compose a list of decisive points, which potentially inform students' decision for picking a certain university. He argued for incentivising tight structures in a bid to attract the brightest minds available.

Information policy and transparency of third cycle programmes at the University of Bergen

In her presentation Gry Kibsgaard of the University of Bergen argued that European universities' ambition to reach their research goals through high quality doctoral programmes needs to be substantiated by corresponding strategic moves. Some of these have been laid down in the Banff Meeting in June 2007. This meeting called for a review of the global flow of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows (early stage researchers). Furthermore it was agreed upon to clarify and strengthen the role of masters degree (success in masters a prerequisite for success in PhD-programs). In her presentation Kibsgaard argued that transparency was only possible with a clear strategy, a well-documented set of rules, regulations and plans for doctoral training. Once this set has been concurred a university needs to decide which information should be communicated. Questions to answer might include: Which model of doctoral training is in place? Which research areas do you have, strenghts, cooperation with industry (future career moves for prospective PhD-students). Information and transparency thereof are intrinsically strategic questions. Thus Kibsgaard urged universities to answer these questions convincingly before setting out to shape their public profile. One of these initial strategic questions is whether a university aims to communicate doctoral training as research, as education, or as both research and education?

Answering this question will provide a formative guideline for the ensuing information strategy concerning third cycle programmes. The presentation went on to list crucial areas to consider. These included admission, assessment, supervision, mobility and potential career possibilities. Prospective students are looking for

- ✓ accessible information on websites, with English manguage information as the minimum criteria of accessibility
- ✓ research opportunities (Info about PhD linked to research)
- ✓ names and faces of the prospective the research team (who will I be working with?)
- ✓ the nature of the doctoral training; programs, courses, mobility, funding?
- ✓ Application procedures
- ✓ admission criteria
- ✓ funding opportunities
- ✓ career opportunities after PhD
- ✓ info on the university in general
- ✓ facts about the city

In concluding Kibsgaard advised the coordinators to avoid overregulation, but seek abundance in information and transparency in doctoral training.

Long term experience with European PhD programmes

Annamaria de Rosa's presentation drew from her extensive expertise of the European PhD on Social Representations and Communication. The programmes' website is characterised by an integrated structure between virtual and actual mobility.

Historically the programme was launched in 1996 when the first students enrolled. As a bottom-up initiative the European PhD on Social Representations and Communication started with cooperation among the scientific community before moving up the university hierarchy.

De Rosa described the programme as a real joint project with joint procedures, not merely a complementary effort. A major advantage of the programme is the students' choice of a range of researchers organised in research groups. They can stay in two different European universities, and make use of virtual mobility and a modern web auditorium. Transferable skills are explicitly integrated and linked to research work. The PhD programme regularly invites professionals from certain fields, such as rhetoric coaches, in order to capitalise on input from professionals outside academia proper.

Working Session 1 on the integration of transferable skills

Definition

The UNICA Bologna-Lab defines transferable skills broadly as skills useful and applicable outside the immediate context of acquisition. It anchors transferable skills on the three following levels¹:

1. Knowledge and insights
2. Ability and skills
3. Judgement and attitude

These three dimensions should be embedded and mirrored throughout each of the three cycles. The accentuation of transferable skills will change and progress from Bachelor to Master to PhD studies.

The need to assess and evaluate their successful acquisition might constitute a potential dilemma of transferable skills. In order to steer clear of the pitfalls of narrow-minded interpretations of learning outcomes assessment the UNICA Bologna-Lab recommends a pragmatic approach. This might entail the practice of three or more supervisors or new overarching forms of examination.

Approach

Two dimensions characterise the UNICA Bologna-Lab approach:

1. The strife to establish a dialogue with curriculum developers to identify the skills students acquire *in the course of their academic work*. These relate to the fields, methodologies and traditions of academic areas.
2. Definition of skills *linked to the academic work but not emanating from it exclusively*. It is the responsibility of the institutions to develop instruments to help students acquire transferable skills of this category.

In the future EHEA students will enter the labour market (be it within or outside academia) advertising not only their subject-specific skills but also the quality and range of the transferable skills they picked up at. This further integration of transferable skills works in tandem with awareness-raising efforts which include the highlighting of what is already

¹ As suggested by the Swedish National Qualifications Framework

embedded in programs. Transferable skills will come to play a part in the PR of institutions and feed into their branding activities. As there is no one-size-fits-all approach financial burdens might arise. Especially on PhD level universities might be able to mitigate these by considering a closer alignment of personnel management courses and offers of further training with PhD student courses.

Institutions have to do some soul-searching at this point. Unless they clarify the boundaries of their responsibility for PhD students, their capacity to define sets of transferable skills remains hampered. Universities still grapple with the organisation of their third cycle programs. They are not yet sufficiently confident about these programs' status, which renders the successful distribution and the embedding of transferable skills unattainable.

A university responsibility

The UNICA Bologna-Lab considers it a central responsibility of a modern European university to arrange and cater for offers in the field of transferable skills. Topics could include research leadership, applications for funding, scientific communication, the interaction of science and society, Creativity, the capacity to think outside the box, or academic writing skills. Research experience itself is identified as a valuable asset for life both within and outside academia. The capacity to cope with failure distinguishes PhD students in particular.

These offers ought to be organised with a view to avoiding unyielding structures as students' transferable skills needs are by definition highly individualised. Therefore it is imperative to design paths to a personal transferable skills portfolio flexibly. Offers have to be designed so as to accommodate the heterogeneous abilities and subject backgrounds of a university's student population.

UNICA Bologna-Lab observations

There is currently no encompassing strategy to synchronise and calibrate the integration of transferable skills throughout the three cycles.

There is currently no Bologna-Lab member institution which systematically involves labour market representatives in transferable skills design and integration.

Working session 2 – Internationally-oriented third cycle programmes and the UNICA European Campus

The group debated the Erasmus Mundus 2008 spring call. Johan Falk briefly sketched the status quo of the PhD Multilingualism initiative. Mettinger reported the outcomes of a meeting with Commissioner Orban where, among other projects, the Multilingualism PhD.

In the context of the future set-up of the UNICA European Campus Gry Kibsgaard urged the Coordinators to define a recognisable UNICA identity. She recommended for UNICA to find a gap UNICA can fill, especially when bearing in mind that UNICA universities are often responsible for upholding a country's characteristic academic culture and heritage.

Annamaria de Rosa championed a better dissemination of internationally-oriented programmes and the designing of a brochure as an inventory of existing initiatives. She also spoke out for an agreed upon UNICA standard of information politics. Mettinger joined her by emphasising UNICA's strength of diversity based on an agreement on standards of transparency and information. These would safeguard the label of UNICA's top quality joint degree programmes.

UNICA is in a unique position to answer European challenges (Sweden and Denmark both have climate-focussed programmes)– a vital means of branding UNICA. De Rosa further argued that UNICA should valorise its history of successful EC recognition.

Johan Falk argued for a combined bottom-up (letters to heads of departments to boost topical clusters) and top-down (implementation of joint schools as a network initiative) in re-addressing the European Campus idea.

Arthur Mettinger went on to identify three tasks at hand

1. Build an inventory of joint programmes (minimum of three UNICA institutions) by May 30, 2008. The inventory should then be discussed with the institutional leadership with a view to strategic development planning.
2. The collection of existing Bachelor, Master and PhD cooperations, with information on these programmes.
3. Future development: identify areas of potential collaborations (possibly through bottom-up approaches) for excellent programmes. These topics will be special to UNICA, defining and accentuating the role as capital cities.

By the time of the next meeting in Dubrovnik the discussion process within institutions should be reported on.

Outlook

The 8th UNICA Bologna Lab Coordinators Meeting will take place on Thursday, July 3, 2008 in Dubrovnik, Croatia. The arrivals would be July 2.

Intended outcome: Mettinger envisaged an accorded action plan for Rectors as a desirable outcome of that meeting.

Melita Kovacevic suggested that the organisation of third cycle programmes, doctoral schools versus individual programmes, should be addressed at the next meeting.

Arthur Mettinger stated his preference for closer alignment of the Bologna Lab with the group of Doctoral Studies and the EU Researchers. Future Bologna Lab agenda items will include

- ✓ Qualifications frameworks
- ✓ The social dimension
- ✓ Social integration of students with particular needs
- ✓ The synchronisation of academic calendars
- ✓ Quality assurance.