Europe Seeks to Harmonize Its Degrees

European officials hope that standardizing practices will make each country's system of higher education more competitive in a global student market, without sacrificing quality

PRAGUE—Prague's historic castle was an appropriate setting for a meeting this past spring of Europe's top education officials. The topic was the future of higher education in Europe, and the castle—a majestic but confusing maze of structures that inspired Franz Kafka's classic novel about modern alienation and bureaucracy—served as a metaphor for the Kafkaesque labyrinth facing students who want to transfer degrees or credits between colleges in different European nations.

Europe has some of the world's oldest, and best, universities. But efforts to unify higher education standards have always played second fiddle to powerful regional and national sentiments. That is slowly changing, however, as national parliaments wrestle with recent promises by government ministers to provide undergraduates with a relatively harmonized system of degrees, credits, and requirements.

"Student mobility is a driving force for quality in higher education, because the best universities benefit," says Thomas Östros, Sweden's education and science minister and co-chair of the Prague meeting (*Science*, 25 May, p. 1465). "We need to make our higher education systems more attractive to students from elsewhere in Europe and around the world." Students themselves agree: The National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), which represents students in 35 countries, has long campaigned for easier mobility—of students, degrees, and scholarships.

The concept of a "European Higher Education Area" that was discussed in Prague has its roots in a 1998 meeting in Paris of education ministers from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Two years ago, in Bologna, the ministers agreed to move toward "easily readable and comparable degrees"—including bachelor's and master's degrees in most fields. Other goals include standardizing a system of transferable credits; establishing "quality assurance" networks to vet each other's degrees and credits; and easing the movement of students and researchers across national borders.

The changes, if adopted, would have a profound impact on higher education in many European countries. At German universities, for example, the first degree earned by undergraduates remains the Diplom, which lies somewhere between a U.S. bachelor's and master's degree. In Britain, most undergraduates get a U.S.-style bachelor's degree in 3 years. And Belgian students first earn a 2-year degree, called a "candidat," before spending another 2 years on a "licencie" degree. "At the moment, there are more higher education systems than there are countries in Europe," says Guy Haug, the chief adviser to the European University Association, a newly formed organization that represents both European universities and their rectors. "A single country can have up to 100 different academic qualifications."

That variety often foils science and mathematics majors who want to spend part of their undergraduate years in another country. "There are so many different requirements and rules that transferring can be a nightmare," says Martina Vukasovic, who studies astronomy at the University of Belgrade.

The plethora of national languages is another obstacle. Although English may have replaced Latin as the de facto lingua franca of science, it is still not the language of undergraduate instruction at most European universities. The exception is within the United Kingdom and Ireland, where universities are swamped with applicants. "We had to slow the influx of international students" in response to complaints by politicians that Irish students were losing out, says Art Cosgrove, president of University College Dublin.

Keys to the castle. European educators hope to simplify a system as complex as the Prague castle that inspired Kafka.

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Educators disagree over the extent to which their institutions should embrace English. Josef Koubek, rector of the Institute of Chemical Technology in Prague, says English could be "the working language" of universities as long as classes are also taught in the nation's native language. But French education minister Jack Lang decries such cultural homogeneity. "Europe should be proud of its multiple languages," he argues. "It should refuse the dominance of a single language."

Students often are caught in the middle of the debate as they seek greater mobility without abandoning their native language. Take Manja Klemencic of Slovenia's Maribor University, a communications science major. Fluent in Slovenian and English, she will attend Finland's Vaasa University this fall, taking classes in English. "Even though English instruction helps students like me, I still think that Europe is all about diversity and that it would be a mistake to promote one language as a lingua franca," she says.

Whatever the language of instruction, educators say that comparable courses at different universities should be of similar quality. That will require some sort of accreditation system that all nations recognize. The continent's rectors, meeting in Spain in March, threw their weight behind the idea of a pan-European accreditation process, but the education ministers aren't yet willing to take that step. Instead, they called for greater collaboration within the existing body on quality assurance that includes representatives of national accreditation agencies but has no real power at a European level.

Although Sweden, Italy, and some other nations are already far along, parliaments elsewhere are still debating reforms in their higher education systems. Major efforts under way in France, Germany, and Austria would be consistent with the Bologna goals. And Östros feels that, despite disagreements on accreditation, participants at the Prague summit "made strides toward the goals of stimulating mobility and encouraging more reforms in higher education."

Jacob Henricson, a Swedish student who heads ESIB, is not quite as optimistic. He worries that too many rectors and government officials view students as simply "consumers of a tradable service" and has pleaded with them to remember their real constituents. "Students have to be partners in this reform process," he says, "because we are the people it affects the most."

–ROBERT KOENIG