9th Meeting of UNICA Bologna Lab Coordinators,
University of Vienna
November 25, 2008

Summary

Introduction

The UNICA Bologna-Laboratory closed 2008 with its traditional Lab Coordinators Meeting, this time organised by and held at the University of Vienna. The Meeting, which drew over 20 Bologna-Lab Coordinators, was dedicated to three major tracks: UNICA activities present and future, current European higher education developments and the future set-up of the Laboratory itself. When opening the meeting Arthur Mettinger pointed to the original idea underpinning the Bologna-Laboratory. At the outset the coordinators met to exchange advice on systems and tools introduced by the Bologna Process. This initial phase was characterised by mutual learning and the building of trust. Now both UNICA and the European Higher Education Area are increasingly branching out. Thus the Bologna-Laboratory faces new challenges and needs to adopt new approaches.

I. UNICA activities present and future

Arthur Mettinger reflected on a series of events UNICA organised and hosted this year. In many ways 2008 marked UNICA’s coming off age at European level. The network successfully established itself as a recognised player in the higher education sphere. Its hands-on approach rooted in close institutional ties contributed to its status as a European quality network. UNICA is currently lobbying for a seat on the EUA board.

The Erasmus Mundus Action 4 aims at devising standard forms of describing study programmes. The goal is to design a broadly accepted and supported charter, which governs and guides information policy in the coming 1 ½ years.

This relaunch of the UNICA European Campus in the form of Erasmus Mundus Action 4 project: European Campus builds on identifying a catalogue of essential information which describes a degree programme to an international student target group. The initial focus shall be on the master’s level, only later PhD programmes might be added. The challenge currently resides in the question who decides which programmes should be put on the website.

II. Current European higher education developments

Peter van der Hijden’s input displayed his trademark blend of concise information coupled with a deadpan delivery. He managed to grab the participants’ attention by offering an encapsulation of current trends and took stock of major developments in the past before forecasting potential future trends. Appealing to UNICA’s grass-roots core he underlined that Brussels developments were not exclusively top-down driven. A huge element of any new policy initiative remains rooted in bottom-up initiatives. This snowball effect offers a massive chance, particularly in times when the European
Commission was in flux. Now, he stressed, was a good moment to be heard. UNICA should in particular reply collectively to a EC paper on mobility, which was due to be published in early 2009. Peter referred to the European Parliament as a friend in educational affairs and branded the EU’s general underperformance. It was time to get rid of the traditional all-or-nothing approach to higher education. Higher education should be open for broader parts of the population. Whereas the United States of America were excellent at the top and democratic at the bottom of their tertiary sector, the EU was neither. When debating mobility schemes, Arthur Mettinger voiced his unease about the current discussion. In order to raise quality, he argued, sheer numbers do not matter. He encouraged the definition of quality parameters and a boost to staff mobility rather than parochially augmenting student mobility. The diversification of mobility throughout the cycles ought to be part of future institutional strategies on internationalisation.

Peter van der Hijden explained that rankings were here to stay. Consequently the European Commission’s stance was to follow the ‘if you can’t beat them join them’ approach. Currently an independent group works on designing a new ranking, which concentrates on alternative parameters.

III. Future set-up of the UNICA Bologna-Laboratory

Facing an increased diversification of higher education issues the UNICA Bologna-Laboratory aims at maintaining its established platform of practical advice and exchange. After almost four years it was time, however, to address crucial issues of structure and organisation of the Bologna-Laboratory community. The last meeting in Dubrovnik identified five action lines, which might underpin the future work of the Bologna-Laboratory.

1. University outreach
2. University-enterprise partnership – employability
3. Didactics and learning in the context of lifelong learning
   a. The creation of educational institutional profiles
4. Anchoring the Bologna Process – learning from each other
   a. Adaptation of administrative processes
5. The capital dimension – how can the role and profile of UNICA institutions as capital institutions be accentuated for the benefit of the network

Rather than fragmenting the UNICA Bologna-Laboratory experience by dividing the Lab into subgroups - as suggested by the Dubrovnik outcomes - the group opted for an alternative path. Annamaria de Rosa championed an approach, which seeks to activate the Lab Coordinators in their own setting. The group also agreed that the established structure of 2 annual meetings should be kept, it proved workable and therefore shall be adhered to. After a lively discussion the group then decided to preserve the Lab structure and stick to the principle of the Lab Coordinators as the key contributors and multipliers. On top of this structure, however, ad-hoc internal working groups should be formed. This works in tandem with the necessary need for UNICA to define policy goals, to set indicators and sketch broad targets for the Bologna-Lab. The working groups shall then report back to the plenum and furthermore be active in preparing Lab Meetings. A working group should consist of 3 to 5 Lab Coordinators. The idea was also voiced to use the Youth Agora’s satellite website system for the Bologna-Lab.

Employability and its meaning and interpretations in the different cycles was picked as the key topic for the next meeting. An OSCE expert on the topic should be invited as a guest speaker. The next meeting was tentatively slotted for spring 2009. A call featuring a deadline for responses will be published. Should there be no responses no meeting will be held.

Finally, David Baldinger announced that he will leave the University of Vienna at the end of 2008 and will therefore also quit his position as UNICA Bologna-Laboratory moderator. David wished the Bologna-Laboratory all the best and thanked the group for this very interesting and enriching experience. Both Arthur Mettinger and Kris Dejonckheere thanked David on behalf of UNICA for his excellent work and expressed their hope of future collaboration with him; all Bologna Lab coordinators present joined in these thanks.