

EURASHE SEMINAR

“Survey on the Tertiary Short Cycle Education in Europe”

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Preamble

Considering that at the **Lisbon European Council** in March 2000, government leaders set the EU a 10-year mission to become ***the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion,***

Considering that training systems have a key role to play in making this vision a reality and that optimal use has to be made of the full potential of the competencies and skills of all those present at all levels in education and training systems,

Considering that according to the Communication on **Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality** adopted by the Commission on 21 November 2001, the Member States should transform formal education and training systems in order to break down barriers between different forms of learning,

Considering that one of **the key objectives of the Detailed Work programme on the Future Objectives of Education and training systems in Europe** is about facilitating access for all to education and training systems,

Considering that within the framework of the Bologna process attention has been devoted mainly to the BAMA –structure in a European HE area and that in a number of countries there are an important number of students attending Tertiary Short Cycle education or sub-degree programmes,

Considering that until now hardly any attention had been paid to Tertiary Short Cycle education and its position as far as the Bologna declaration is concerned,

EURASHE has taken the initiative to carry out the project: "Analysis of Tertiary Short Cycle Education in Europe". The present study is a first general comparative study which hopefully will be followed by more detailed studies on several key elements of Tertiary Short Cycle education.

Summary of the study

Seen in a European perspective Tertiary Short Cycle (TSC) education constitutes a very varied and heterogeneous group of programmes and studies. In some countries a part of those programmes are recognised as higher education, in other countries none of TSC education is recognised as higher education. In effect, the same type of education leading to the same professional qualifications can be recognized as Higher Education within one country, but in another country placed in the sector of post-secondary education without connections to higher education. TSC education can be found at university- as well as non-university level and even in secondary schools. This situation creates major problems for both the national and international comparability of programmes as well as for the mobility of students and teachers. To inspire and support this area of education, specific measures have to be taken. It is hoped that the present study clarifies some of these issues and will make people aware of the richness, the diversity and the potential of tertiary short cycle and post-secondary education.

The sector of Tertiary Short Cycle or sub-degree education in Europe represents together with post-secondary education more than **2,5 million** students (1,7 million in Short Cycle Higher Education and

over 800,000 in post-secondary education). These cannot be neglected if we want to become ***the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010***, as stated at The Lisbon summit in 2000.

Students in TSC or sub-degree education are **mainly students looking for a short professional or vocational qualification** after secondary education. It is therefore not surprising that some TSC institutions have developed **specific forms of co-operation with enterprises so as to prepare their students better for future employment**. Tertiary Short Cycle education is very often embedded in the local community and has by its very nature close links with business, professional organisations and industry and thus it can definitely contribute to the effectiveness of the **knowledge sharing between the world of higher education and the professional world**.

Most legislation governing TSC or sub-degree education is very recent and has been enacted over the last five years or is still in preparation. The fact that legislation is so recent in most countries proves that this is a sector that is on the move.

Tertiary Short Cycle education definitely contributes to diversification in higher education as it expands the range of studies from which students can choose. Next to the wide range of studies offered in TSC, there is also a variety of **flexible learning paths such as part-time study, adult education, Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning (APEL), distance and Internet learning** which make these studies especially attractive for mature students or students that would otherwise not access higher education. **Such flexibility enhances lifelong learning**.

For all the reasons mentioned above, (APEL, flexible learning paths etc.) **there seems to be a lower threshold to TSC** education than to traditional university education and TSC plays a very important role in involving those groups of society that would otherwise not or less participate in higher education. It is important that these advantages of TSC or sub-degree education do not get lost in future developments that tend to integrate TSC higher education as steps towards degree education.

Several examples all over Europe show that **TSC education swiftly adapts to the needs of the labour market as well public as private**. This is also reflected in the fact that in a number of countries TSC or sub-degree education has been set up in collaboration with industry or employers to meet the companies' needs and skills shortages. The fact that over the last few years so many new fields of study have been set up, proves that **we are dealing with a thriving sector meeting existing demands and needs in society**.

Although **the majority of students who have finished TSC prefer to join the labour market as soon as they have graduated, an increasing number of them decides to take on degree studies immediately after graduation or at a later stage in life**. This is definitely facilitated where TSC is already integrated in HEIs or where there are close links between TSC and other HEIs. Ladders of learning, or even better, networks of learning as they exist already in some educational systems in Europe, enhance the student's chances of accumulating credits for the skills and competences acquired and making use of them whenever he or she decides to continue his or her education.

In most countries surveyed there are links between TSC education and HEIs. By facilitating access of students who have finished TSC/sub-degree studies, universities and institutions of higher education do or will contribute to the **implementation of some of the key objectives of the Detailed Work programme on the Future Objectives of Education and training systems in Europe**. **The integration of TSC within HEIs or the interaction between the HEIs and institutions providing TSC education can help maintain or upgrade the quality of TSC and also boost its attractiveness for as well the students as for the labour market**.

It may be assumed **that practice-oriented, experience-based and work-related learning** used in TSC education is the **more appropriate methodology to be used** for those students who may have a more deductive than inductive approach to learning. This may in several cases also apply to some students in degree higher education in HEIs with a clear professional profile. It would be useful to study this more thoroughly so as to see whether those deductive pedagogical methodologies - going from practice to theory - are more appropriate for those students. It should also be looked into in which ways those deductive methodologies promote more strongly motivation for lifelong learning.

Institutions offering TSC or sub-degree education are using credit systems (many of them ECTS) and **Diploma Supplement** very often because of a legal obligation. The accumulation of credits and the transparency and comparability of contents in TSC or sub-degree education will definitely be enhanced by the use of these credit systems and by using the Diploma Supplement.

Students and teachers in TSC are mobile under Erasmus (Socrates programme) and Leonardo da Vinci. They also participate in other actions of European or bilateral programmes. Obstacles to mobility are similar to those in university education but the main obstacles specific for TSC are the fact that a number of institutions are too small and that the sector is not well known or not well defined.

Programmes in TSC last between one and (exceptionally) four years. They are certified with a large panoply of titles thus adding to the confusion especially as similar titles are used in different countries to cover different qualifications and programmes of one, two or three years' duration. It is therefore suggested to look for a **common qualifications framework and for common European titles in TSC education.** Developments in certain countries such as the UK with the Foundation degree are therefore very welcome.

Quality in higher education is one of the key concepts that should embrace different aspects such as teaching, staffing, students, infrastructure etc. It is therefore good to see that the **majority of institutions in sub-degree or tertiary short cycle education are subject to quality assessment and that virtually all of them are accredited.** In many cases this accreditation is still given by the Ministry of education and is not the responsibility of an independent accreditation body.

Transition from TSC to degree programmes is relatively easy in most countries. It is obvious that **where TSC is integrated in HEIs** or where there are close links between institutions offering TSC and other HEIs **the transition is just a further step on the ladder of learning.** Sometimes the credits earned in TSC can be taken into account entirely when proceeding to degree studies but in other cases they will just grant access to university or degree studies. In those countries where the transition is not governed by legislation or where there are no agreed principles it will be a lot more difficult for a student to get accreditation of his or her prior learning.

Next to TSC education, the sector of post-secondary education, was also briefly studied as in some countries the qualifications earned can be the same or similar to those earned in sub-degree or tertiary Short Cycle education. The situation as to access to degree higher education coming from post-secondary education, varies even more greatly ranging from access to the last year of Bachelor studies to no credits at all for the education or training received which means that the student coming from post-secondary cannot benefit in any way from the education received if he wants to go on studying.

The study concludes that **TSC education has to be seen as a genuine and vital part of higher education contributing to the development of a true lifelong learning system and to the bringing about of the knowledge-based society** which Europe needs to power a dynamic economy.

Recommendations

To this effect the **EURASHE study recommends** that:

- **TSC education should be included in all discussions related to the Bologna process.** It also recommends that different forms of co-operation be encouraged between different levels of education ranging from university education to TSC education. It suggests that **TSC education be fully included in qualification frameworks which are developed** in several European countries.
- **Different forms of co-operation should be encouraged between different levels of education ranging from university education, to Tertiary Short Cycle education,** thus warranting better quality assurance and trust between the different levels of Higher Education in Europe. However, **this should not lead to TSC losing its specific professional profile.**

- In order to enhance the continuum of lifelong learning **barriers and obstacles between levels of education** and between different streams of education should be mapped out and efforts have to be made to find constructive ways to **remove those obstacles**.
- A **joint working group** is set up of representatives of HEIs with sub-degree or TSC courses to make a detailed analysis of the ways in **which transition from sub-degree or TSC to degree level is organised**.
- In order **to enhance the transparency of European qualifications in Tertiary Short Cycle** education it would be commendable to foresee not only a **common language** and terminology when referring to the sector but also **common titles** for students in Tertiary Short Cycle education. **Common terminology and common titles for TSC across Europe, will or can contribute to enhancing the transparency and the readability of qualifications delivered in TSC**. The proposal in the UK White paper of 2003 referring to the suggestion to create the Foundation Degree could help to inspire. Recognise that Foundation Degrees are ends in their own right, would give them enhanced status as qualifications.
- In order to **reduce the high drop-out rates** in certain countries co-operation between universities and institutions of higher education delivering Tertiary Short Cycle education should include the development of flexible learning pathways within which students **can upgrade themselves instead of ending up in a waterfall system**, thus preventing an enormous waste of human and financial resources.
- The use of **competence portfolios in Tertiary Short Cycle education in co-operation with degree education** should be encouraged in order to promote lifelong learning.
- The **use of ECTS and diploma supplement in Tertiary Short Cycle education to enhance the comparability and transferability** of TSC education should be further encouraged.
- **QA and Accreditation procedures should be put in place** in all Tertiary Short Cycle education, preferably by independent QA agencies and Accreditation bodies working together with professional bodies and foreign experts.
- **The Commission and the Bologna Signatories follow-up closely all developments in relation with Tertiary Short Cycle education**.
- European **projects in the field of mobility and curriculum development be funded by priority** within the framework of the EU programmes in the field of education and training that are **promoting co-operation between degree and Tertiary Short Cycle education**.
- **More in-depth research** and studies should be carried out on the strategic elements of this comparative study, especially the transition to degree studies and the impact of TSC on the continuum of lifelong learning, and the sectors and disciplines concerned. Particular attention should also be paid in studies focusing a.o. on the deductive pedagogical methods used in TSC.

Reference:

Magda Kirsch, Yves Beernaert and Søren Nørgaard: *“Tertiary Short Cycle Education in Europe”*, May 2003.

The report is available at the EURASHE website, or by contact to the EURASHE Secretariat:

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