1. REFORM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE

1.1 AN INTRODUCTION

Nowhere today is higher education undergoing more substantial change than in Europe. As countries pursue policies designed to integrate their economies, political systems and social structures, it is becoming increasingly clear that higher education, research and innovation are critical components to fully realising the potential gains stemming from the changes ahead. This very idea has been espoused in several high-level European wide processes and has given rise to a series of ambitious goals and objectives designed to ensure long term European pre-eminence as both a knowledge producer and transmitter. European higher education systems have shown themselves to be no stranger to political reform: for the better part of three decades the sector has been included in the much broader national and international—even global—reforms in Western and Eastern Europe. In order to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of our Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, former and current CHEPS staff have written the chapters of this book analysing and reflecting on issues of reform in European higher education. This introduction provides a brief overview of some of the major issues at stake in European higher education and introduces the contributions to this book.

European higher education systems have always undergone political reform; since the late 1990s, though, the rate of intended change has accelerated to unprecedented levels, largely on the shoulders of two key developments: the Bologna Declaration (1999), whose objective is to make the European higher education systems more competitive and attractive and the EU’s Lisbon Strategy (2000), which seeks to reform the continent’s still fragmented higher education systems into a more powerful and more integrated, knowledge-based economy. The EU’s Modernisation Agenda (2007) highlights education, research, innovation and the modernisation of higher education institutions as important pillars of the Lisbon Strategy. Appropriate governance and funding structures and processes are regarded as a precondition to achieve these goals.

The Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 constituted the first signal of the preference of major European countries (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) for a more compatible and comparable set of European higher education systems while preserving the rich diversity of teaching, learning styles and higher education cultures. In Bologna one year later, 25 other European countries joined the original four. At each biannual ministerial follow-up conference since, more countries have joined the fray and by 2010 the total number of countries had reached 47. Though the
diversity within European higher education is regarded as one of its major strengths, at the same time a common path towards transparency, quality, growth, efficiency and excellence is regarded a prerequisite for making Europe one of the strongest educational and economic leaders in the world.

The Bologna Process aimed at the establishment of a European Higher Education Area by 2010, and Westerheijden et al. (2010) have recently assessed the first decade of working on it. While signatory countries have to some extent interpreted the Declaration in their own ways, the process rapidly achieved a wide acceptance. Focusing at first on reforming study programmes into the two-cycle ‘bachelor-master’ structure, concerns about comparability soon pushed quality assurance and accreditation and degree recognition firmly into the mix. Bologna’s perspective broadened in Berlin (2003) with the inclusion of the Ph.D. as the third cycle and with linking the European Higher Education Area with the European Research Area. The third cycle was discussed again in Bergen (2005) through the explicit mentioning of ‘the importance of higher education in further enhancing research and the importance of research in underpinning higher education for the economic and cultural development of our societies and for social cohesion.’ The London communiqué (2007) stressed steps towards more student-centred higher education, and the increase in mobility between cycles and internationally. Important progress was made towards a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) adopted in April 2008 and the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAR) was initiated in June 2008. In the 2009 follow-up conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, the latest one before the writing of this book, the development of instruments to facilitate transparency came to the forefront.

In this book, Marike Faber and Don Westerheijden analyse multi-level policy dynamics in the context of the Bologna process in their contribution European Degree Structure and National Reform: Constitutive Dynamics of the Bologna Process. In their comparative analysis of national case studies they find that ‘Bologna’ was deployed as additional support for initiating changes of national higher education systems while ‘Bologna’ also brought about European pressure that affected national higher education policies. Although the Bologna agreement is a non-binding construction in a legal perspective, national actors can conceive of striving towards a common European degree structure as coercion. National technical changes in degree structure can be interpreted as having created a symbolic outcome in the creation of a European higher education system based on a common degree structure: there is unity in a European dimension at face value, while diversity at the national levels continues.

In her contribution, Reform of Doctoral Training in Europe: A Silent Revolution?, Andrea Kottmann argues that attempts to reform doctoral education increasingly move from the national to the European level. The 2003 Berlin Communiqué of the Bologna process can be seen as a starting point for this shift in the discussion. It stated that doctoral studies should be regarded as a third cycle in the Bologna reform, but at the same time diversity was explicitly to be maintained. Yet a ‘silent revolution’ towards more convergence has taken place. Kottmann argues that international organisations play a crucial role in disseminating policies, for example by publishing handbooks and standards. She points in particular to the EUA and its Council