

## ***The construction of the European Higher Education Space***

*The European Convergence Process has taken the last step towards Europe's unification in university education. That's the outcome of previous initiatives that, for more than a decade, the European Union has been developing in programs that promote and encourage mobility and exchanges of teachers and students among the various universities of the continent that are taking part in the process.*

*Similarly, this process implies the creation of a system for the recognition of credits among all the universities and higher education institutions within the EU. These European credits make possible for students, once they finish their university studies, to have access to a free labor market in all member countries by adding to their title a certificate called European Title Supplement.*

*Europe's new knowledge society requires such unification of criteria for the elaboration of the curricular contents for all titles. A unified university formation in today's Europe will make possible a much-desired improvement of quality of higher education in order to meet current socio-cultural needs. A European society intent on the elimination of borders and barriers cannot ignore the importance of such unification for its citizens' cultural formation.*

*The European Higher Education Space consolidates the Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) declarations, in which the prime-ministers of the first countries to integrate the process (United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy) invite member-States to develop activities that will constitute not only a market in which there's a free flow of products, but also a common space for knowledge. Such activities are centered in a series of concrete actions, such as:*

- To adopt a comprehensive system of university titles that makes possible the option for a European Title Supplement in order to promote free professional and labor circulation in the European higher education systems.*
- To establish a title system centered in two cycles. The first cycle is adjusted to the demands of the European labor market and provides a qualification that is adequate to it; and the second cycle leads to Graduate work such as a Master's Degree and/or a Ph.D.*
- To create a European Credits Transfer System (ECTS), which may be co-validated among universities, in order to encourage the mobility of instructors and students.*
- To foster student mobility so they can carry out academic studies in other European universities as well.*
- To develop educational criteria and methodologies that stimulate European cooperation and ensure improved quality in the educational processes and in their results.*
- To encourage, as a new initiative, the pursuit of knowledge throughout life as an essential element for competing at the European level, the continuous adjustment to the social demand of each titled individual, and the improvement of his/her professional quality and competence.*
- To promote more actively the role of the university and its students in the Process of European Convergence, as well as the initiatives launched by universities to stimulate and make attractive everything this educational transformation implies through systems to ensure quality and through accreditation and certification mechanisms.*

*It is planned for 2007 the beginning of the work for the establishment of quality standards for the entire EU, the marks of national qualifications, the issuing and recognition of joint titles and PhDs, and the opportunities for students to choose a flexible course program in higher education. The year of 2010 is the limit for the full adoption of educational innovation in European universities.*

*The European Credits Transfer System implies considering as credits the student's total study load, defined as the unit for the evaluation of academic work, in addition to the teaching and internship hours he/she shares with instructors. Thus credits would encompass time spent studying, exams, bibliographical research, individual and group work, classes and dedication in internships, among others. Each credit presupposes between 25 to 30 hours of work, and the total work load for each full time student during an academic year is quantified in 60 credits. A semester is equivalent to 30 credits, with an average of 40 weeks of academic work and 40 hours of work load per week, regardless of the title the student is pursuing.*

*This new system demands a transformation in teaching and learning processes and requires the planning of new teaching guidelines and evaluation system. In Spain's universities that's already underway through projects of educational innovation that instructors have begun with students in order to introduce gradually the new educational system.*

*Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the entire process may be planning how students are going to be evaluated. The new directives have introduced the evaluation of the competences that in each title the student must reach through a series of abilities, skills and capacities, in accordance with his/her course's curricular content. Such competences are classified in turn in generic or transversal competences, which are the same for all titles; in other competences that are specific to each title; and in curricular and concrete competences for each discipline.*

*Higher studies levels have been structured in two levels. In the First Level or Degree, the student must attain the generic and transversal competences, as well as those required by his/her title, in order to reach an integral and professional formation that makes possible his/her insertion into the labor market. The student must "learn how to learn" and get involved in the educational processes with an active and cooperative participation. This first cycle requires 180 credits plus 60 ECTS for the labor market.*

*In Spain, this level is structured in four years for Nursing. In the first three years the student takes the required 180 credits, and in the fourth the remaining 60 credits are dedicated to an internship and the presentation of a final project.*

*Although at the time this Editorial is being written the definitive General Directives of the European Higher Education Studies have not been made public, it's already known that the disciplines, as they are structured today, have disappeared from the study plans, as well as the descriptors and the areas of knowledge as they are currently planned. Contents will be integrated according to what they are intended to teach. As an example, the former disciplines of Maternal Nursing, Child Nursing, Medical-Surgical Nursing, and Geriatric Nursing have been grouped together in what is called Life's Distinct Stages.*

*Graduate studies, or Level Two, according to European declarations, will make possible the pursuit of a Master's Degree and/or a PhD – the student will take 60 credits, which, added to the 240 credits of the First Level, allow for a Master's Degree thesis or a Doctoral dissertation. That's valid for Nursing too. Universities will offer Graduate studies for Master's Degrees, with more specific formative objectives oriented towards intellectual development and maximization of creativity and critical spirit. It will be possible to earn a Master's Degree combining studies in more than one university (a European Union Master's Degree), with the issuing of a joint diploma.*

*The new structure of the official Graduate studies in Spain is regulated by article 88.2 of the Organic Law of Universities, of December 21, 2005. It closes a long process of innovation in higher education which in Spain integrates itself, along with other European countries, in the construction of a European Higher Education Space, within the Program of European Convergence for structuring university Undergraduate and Graduate studies.*

*Nursing students in Spain, upon finishing their two cycles, may have access, like the students from other areas, to his/her university's European Title Supplement or accreditation, which informs the studies he/she has undergone and the competences and capacities he/she has acquired. The supplement will make possible for him/her to move about freely within the European market as a Nursing graduate.*

*Academic accreditation is the key for the achievement of quality. It's for that reason that each European country created, before the process began, a system to ensure quality that evaluated not only its current universities, but what they should be like considering society's demands from its titled professionals.*

*In Spain such organ is the National Agency for Quality Evaluation and Accreditation (Aneca, in the Spanish acronym), created in 2003 within a National Evaluation Plan for university titles. Aneca has ahead great challenges, now that the evaluation it has carried out of the different titles given by Spanish universities is behind, before it gets the European certification and accreditation that the European Higher Education Space will require by 2010.*