

The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education - A Brief Introduction

Introduction

The Bologna Process has been the driving force of Higher Education reform in Europe since its beginnings in 1999. Although the Bologna Process is an intergovernmental, legally non binding, essentially political process, its impact has been phenomenal. With currently 46 signatory countries the main aim is to establish a European Area of Higher education (EHEA) by the year 2010. Unhindered mobility of students, teachers and researchers within this area is to be achieved through the implementation of a set of action streams including the removing of obstacles to mobility and the creation of a readable and transparent system of degrees essentially based on 3 cycles: Undergraduate Bachelor degrees, Masters degrees and doctorates. Other areas of activity focus on quality assurance, acceptance and transferability of qualification and credits as well as creating a European dimension in higher education and promoting life long learning.

Bologna - how does the process work?

It is important to remember that the Bologna Process is a voluntary commitment by European countries to cooperate in creating the EAHE and as such is a political process and not binding law.

Decisions within the Bologna Process are made intergovernmentally. Ministers in charge of higher education from the 46 signatory countries meet every two years to assess progress and plan for the future. Following the ministerial summit a communiqué detailing the main points arising from the meeting is published. It assesses achievements made to date and sets the agenda for the coming two years. The last ministerial summit took place in London in May 2007. The next will be hosted by the Benelux countries in April 2009.

Two groups support the ministerial meetings: The Bologna Follow-Up Group and the Bologna Process Board. They are organised and administered by the Bologna Secretariat which the Benelux countries currently hold. The Bologna Follow-Up Group is made up of ministerial representatives from all 46 Bologna signatory countries and representatives of other European-level

organisations including the following: the European Commission; the European University Association (EUA); the European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA); the National Union of Students in Europe (ESIB); the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE); and the Council of Europe. The group's role is to follow up on the recommendations made at the ministerial meetings. It produces a Work Programme which constitutes a series of conferences and activity relevant to all involved in the Process. Countries are also free to pursue their own follow-up activities according to the ministerial communiqué.

The second group, the Bologna Board is smaller. It consists of the host countries of the previous and forthcoming ministerial summits, and representatives of the acting, previous and succeeding EU Presidencies. Also involved again are the European Commission, the organisations listed above and representatives of two countries from outside the EU. The board oversees work between the meetings of the follow up group.

Bologna and Course structure

The Bologna Process aims to bring clarity to the plethora of higher education systems across Europe. Students, teachers, researchers and employers should be able to assess the level of qualification held regardless of where that qualification was obtained. The Process thus envisages the '*adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees*' (Bologna Declaration p3).

Signatory countries committed themselves to creating a structure of 3 - 4 year Bachelor degrees providing a qualification for entry into the labour market which can then be followed by more advanced studies for a 1-2 year Masters degree (in the same or related discipline). While this model is familiar as the dominant Anglo-American model, for many signatory countries it meant major change. Where higher education was conducted on the basis of a 1 cycle diploma programme lasting on average 5 years, major reorganisation of programmes

"The European Higher Education Area may set to transform the European State's higher education institutions as fundamentally as the nation state changed the medieval universities." (Corbett 2005 p192).

was necessary.

Bologna and Transferability

If students are to be mobile and undertake periods of study in other countries they need to be assured that those periods will be recognised. The Bologna process thus proposes the *'establishment of a system of credits – such as in the ECTS system – as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility'* (Bologna Declaration p3). The ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) is already used in mobility programmes such as SOCRATES for which it was originally designed. Bachelor courses are to have between 180 - 240 credits whereas Masters degrees will normally require the completion of 90 -120 credits with 60 being the minimum.

The recognition of qualifications is based on the general provisions of the Lisbon Recognition Convention which stipulates that similar qualifications should be recognised and accepted unless there are substantial differences. However commentators have pointed out that many institutions are still in the habit of looking for identical qualifications to qualify the candidate for admission and it has been noted that *'more openmindedness will be necessary for mobility between different national systems'* (Nyborg 2004; p 3)

The diploma supplement is to help facilitate this openmindedness. It documents students' academic achievement and is attached to a higher education diploma or degree with the aim of *'improving international transparency' and [] facilitating the academic and professional recognition of qualifications'* (Berlin Communiqué p5). It describes the nature and level of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed. The supplement is created by the national institutions on the basis of a specially developed template.

[The UK is committed to meeting the] 'objective that every student graduating as from 2005 should receive the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge. (Burgess 2004 p 21)

The widespread use of the diploma supplement should help to reassure students, teachers and employers alike that it is possible to show what a student has achieved and to what level they have studied. Comparability in terms of quality might of course be a separate issue.

Bologna and Quality

Much work has been done within the Bologna Process and there is now an agreement that national quality assurance systems should exist in each signatory country and that these systems should include an independent body responsible for quality assurance and a system of evaluation and accreditation of institutions and their programmes. The aim is to encourage a quality culture within higher education institutions which is where the primary responsibility for quality assurance will lie. Across Europe the national quality assurance systems

vary greatly but the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has developed guidelines, policies and procedures to be followed by those agencies in the Bologna signatory countries. In addition ENQA recommended the adoption of a European Register for those agencies in the Bologna signatory countries. In addition ENQA recommended the adoption of a European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies which will provide clear and reliable information on trustworthy quality assurance agencies in Europe. The recommendation was taken up by the ministers at the ministerial summit in London in May 2007.

Bologna and Research

The importance of doctoral programmes in building a sustainable research base has been widely noted (EUA 2005) and in 2003 the Bologna Process widened its focus to include doctoral research. In 2005 a Bologna Follow up seminar was held in Salzburg to discuss the role of doctorates in the Process and most of the recommendation made there were incorporated into the Bergen Communiqué . The ministers said:

"With a view to achieving better results we recognise the need to improve the synergy between the higher education sector and other research sectors throughout our respective countries and between the EHEA and the European Research Area.

To achieve these objectives, doctoral level qualifications need to be fully aligned with the EHEA overarching framework for qualifications using the outcomes-based approach." (Bergen Communiqué p3 - 4)

A Bologna Process compatible doctorate should have the following characteristics:

- The core component is advancement of knowledge through original research
- The duration of study should be 3 - 4 years Full Time Equivalent (FTE)
- A structured study programme should be provided
- Candidates are early stage researchers and students
- Programmes promote interdisciplinary training and transferable skills

Bologna and the UK - the main issues

The model envisaged by the Bologna Process as discussed above is based on the Anglo-American model of higher education and as such matches the UK system closely. Commentators note that *'there has been no need to make any changes in the UK's higher education laws since the Bologna principles can be achieved under the autonomy of the HEIs'* (Farrington and Palfreyman 2006 p83). Indeed the system of undergraduate, Masters and doctoral degrees will be familiar to the UK reader. Nonetheless the Bologna Process is not insignificant in the UK's higher education landscape. The main

challenges lie in the further integration of credit systems in English universities (credit is already universally used in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). The Bologna quality assurance guidelines also continue to be incorporated into the existing institutional review process carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

The only structural and compatibility difficulties are to be found in relation to integrated Masters courses and professional doctorates. Integrated Masters courses are essentially 4 year undergraduate courses of which the final year includes the Masters component. In order to make these degrees Bologna compatible, universities are increasingly issuing a Bachelor certificate after the first 3 years and are specifying the credits in such a way that the final year has a very clear Masters component.

“It is essential that any basic principles at European level accommodate diversity in purpose, duration and structure of doctoral programmes” (UK HE Europe Unit 2006 p40).

Professional doctorates with significant taught elements do not necessarily seem to comply with the Bologna ideal of what a doctorate should be. However, rather than changing what is seen as a very valuable qualification, the UK has called for flexibility to accommodate different types of programmes.

Overall however, the Bologna process has not required a re-structuring of the higher education landscape in the UK.

Bologna and mobility

Mobility has been at the heart of the process from the beginning. The Berlin Communiqué states: *‘Mobility of students and academic and administrative staff is the basis for establishing a European Higher Education Area. Ministers emphasise its importance for academic and cultural as well as political, social and economic spheres’* (p4). At the ministerial summit in Prague in 2001 *‘Ministers reaffirmed that efforts to promote mobility must be continued to enable students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff to benefit from the richness of the European Higher Education Area includ-*

“Mobility of staff, students and graduates is one of the core elements of the Bologna Process, creating opportunities for personal growth, developing international cooperation between individuals and institutions, enhancing the quality of higher education and research, and giving substance to the European dimension. Some progress has been made since 1999, but many challenges remain. Among the obstacles to mobility, issues relating to immigration, recognition, insufficient financial incentives and inflexible pension arrangements feature prominently. We recognise the responsibility of individual Governments to facilitate the delivery of visas, residence and work permits, as appropriate. Where these measures are outside our competence as Ministers for Higher Education, we undertake to work within our respective Governments for decisive progress in this area. At national level, we will work to implement fully the agreed recognition tools and procedures and consider ways of further incentivising mobility for both staff and students. This includes encouraging a significant increase in the number of joint programmes and the creation of flexible curricula, as well as urging our institutions to take greater responsibility for staff and student mobility, more equitably balanced between countries across the EHEA.” (London Communiqué p2).

ing its democratic values, diversity of cultures and languages and the diversity of the higher education systems’ (p1). Ministers also pointed out their commitment to the removal of obstacles to mobility. In Berlin (2003) reaffirmed the *‘intention to make every effort to remove all obstacles to mobility’* (Berlin Communiqué p4).

Ministers also commented on mobility at doctoral and post doctoral level for the first time, calling for the greater mobility of *‘young researchers’* (Berlin Communiqué p7). The Bergen communiqué indicates that ministers are aware of *‘the many remaining challenges to be overcome’* (p4). Ministers reconfirmed their commitment *‘to making mobility within the EHEA a reality’* and said the Ministers would *‘intensify [their] efforts to lift obstacles to mobility by facilitating the delivery of visa and work permits and by encouraging participation in mobility programmes’* (p4). They went on to *‘urge institutions and students to make full use of mobility programmes, advocating full recognition of study periods abroad within such programmes’* (p4). The London Communiqué of 2007 deals with the rationale for promoting mobility and the remaining obstacles in slightly more concrete terms as can be seen from the extract reproduced in the text-box below.

The Bologna Process - All good then?

The Bologna Process has undoubtedly brought about significant changes to the higher education systems across Europe. For many it has meant the restructuring of single cycle degree programmes into undergraduate Bachelor degrees, postgraduate Masters degrees and doctorates. For the UK the changes have been less marked. However changes do affect the UK as well. British students should find it increasingly possible to study abroad for defined periods and have their studies recognised at home. Many European students will now find it easier to work out where and how the studies they undertake in the UK fit into their degree programme at home.

Employers across Europe will now be able to assess a student’s achievements regardless of where the degree was obtained and the diploma supplement should contain all the relevant information relating to level of study and credits gained.

Further work on quality assurance and harmonising quality standards should ensure that any (perceived) differences in standards expected by different regions and institutions, as far as they exist now, will be reduced as time goes on.

However, the Bologna Process does not only bring positive developments. The course structure is relatively rigid and, it has been argued, therefore reduces students’

academic freedom to choose their subjects and courses freely. It also makes it more difficult to change courses once a student has started on a particular degree programme. The relatively short duration and structured courses might also mean that students are less willing to go abroad during their degrees, perhaps feeling they do not have time to go abroad or preferring to see the course through with their peers.

The Bachelor degree has also been criticised by many countries where a 5 year diploma was the norm. The degree is to offer a qualification for the labour market. However employers in many countries are yet to be convinced that graduates will have the necessary subject and interdisciplinary skills after a 3 year degree and many will prefer a Masters degree in any event.

A further problem arises from the implementation of the system. Many institutions, perhaps understandably, have been tempted to simply split their diploma programmes into two blocks, one of three or four years to form the Bachelor degree and one of one or two years to form the Masters. However, this approach does not offer students a self contained study programme for either degree programme. This means that students are unlikely to have the skills necessary to enter the labour market after the Bachelor part. In addition it makes it much more difficult for students to change subjects for their Masters degree.

Bologna - the future

The future of the Bologna Process is likely to see further effort put into quality assurance issues as well as a renewed focus on the action streams relating to promoting life long learning and creating a European dimension in higher education. While the main 'restructuring work' has been ongoing throughout Europe it has, naturally perhaps, been the focus of much attention. However, now significant progress has been made in that regard attention is turning to other areas such as the active promotion of mobility and the preparation of students for active citizenship with the necessary skills to make them employable across Europe and beyond. The London communiqué states as the priorities for 2007 - 2009 activities dealing with mobility, the social dimension, employability and the European Higher Education Area in its global context.

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