The European Higher Education Area: Goals Achieved & Outlook towards 2010 and Beyond

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1. Why Bologna?

At the 800-year Anniversary Celebration of the Sorbonne University in spring 1998 the Ministers responsible for Higher Education of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom decided that something had to be done about the decreasing student mobility in Europe. They thought it would be necessary to overcome the rampant segmentation of European Higher Education to bring about change. That would, of course, only be possible on a voluntary basis, as higher education issues are part and parcel of subsidiarity, and thus are strictly governed by national law.

The idea was to increase the attractiveness and the competitiveness of European higher education while at the same time holding on to cooperation and partnership of all stakeholders involved (later on the term "co-opetition" was coined to denote this new educational philosophy).

In 1998, at the Education Ministerś Meeting under the Austrian EU-presidency the decision was taken to start working on a European Higher Education Area. In spring 1999 the Bologna Communiqué was adopted by the Ministers of Higher Education of 29 countries and the Bologna Process was borne.

2. The Bologna Credo

What Bologna wants to achieve is the creation of a European Higher Education Area, a space providing unlimited mobility for students, staff, teachers and early stage researchers, with full recognition, quality-assured offers and comparable, transparent study cycles. As so many different agents are involved representing international organizations and institutions, governments, social partners, higher education institutions, teachers and students, a partnership approach including all stakeholders was chosen from the very beginning. This was the only way to ensure sustainable results based on over-all acceptance.

3. Bologna tools and policies

For this purpose the so-called Bologna action lines or objectives were introduced. With every biennial Ministerial Meeting (Bologna 1999 – Prag 2001 – Berlin 2003 – Bergen 2005 – London 2007 – Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 2009) the agenda has been broadened and the tools have been ever more elaborated and have become more target-oriented.

Communiqués and general Bologna documents:

http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/declarations_communiques.htm

Bologna action lines:

- Bachelor – Master – Doctorate/PhD study structure
- European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)
- Quality Assurance
- Mobility Enhancing Measures
- Lifelong Learning (LLL)
- Attractiveness of European Higher Education Institutions (EHIs)
- European Dimension
- Social Dimension

It is important to note that these concepts were not conceived out of the blue, but had been in existence in one way or another throughout European and non-European higher education systems. The bachelor/master two-tier study structure, for example, had been in use at a large majority of higher education institutions worldwide when the Bologna Process got under way. And, not least important for the overall success of the Process, many countries had seen the need to overhaul their HE systems and to adapt them to new challenges looming on the horizon, such as a changing demography, the growing need for lifelong learning offers, the rising cost of education and the consequent search for multiple funding sources, etc.

The first three tools, i.e., the two-tier study system plus doctorate, ECTS, and quality assurance are at the core of the Bologna Process; they form the "golden triangle" upon which all the other measures build. LLL and the social dimension, e.g., were added at a later time. The most prominent and complex project right now are the National Qualifications Frameworks, which serve to express the learning outcomes and thus the qualifications a student has acquired upon graduation. At the same time a QFW is a map of the entire (higher) education system and should reflect the permeability between the different levels and layers of higher education.

3.1 Bachelor – Master – Doctorate/PhD

The Bologna study structure seems to be the most visible and widely felt result of the Bologna Process and is sometimes used as paradigm for it. Most countries have converted their systems to ba/ma. What still seems to cause confusion sometimes is the fact that the length of the bachelor programmes varies between 3 and 4 years (180 and 240 credits).

The basic idea is that bachelor plus master should together encompass 300 credits, which translates into 5 years of work for the students (see ECTS below). It was not understood at the beginning that the curricula for bachelor and master had to be completely redesigned, that dividing the contents of the old 4-5 year diploma programmes and packing them into the new study structure was the wrong way.

Admission between cycles should not be restrictive. This holds especially for master courses. It is clear that students that take an interdisciplinary approach in picking a master programme which partly asks for qualifications they did not acquire in their undergraduate programme, will have to embark on bridging courses. But it makes a difference whether they will be allowed to start their master programme and play catch up at the same time or whether they will not be allowed into graduate studies before doing so. In other words, students should be treated fairly in order not to lose valuable time.

The stocktaking exercise carried out by a working group of the Bologna Follow-up Group shows that, with a few exceptions, the conversion to the bachelor/master study structure is practically complete,

3.2 ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

The success of this information and transparency system hinges upon many factors. The information package, giving a detailed description of the course offer in the national and a widely-used European language (English); the learning agreement to guarantee recognition; the transcript of records; and, last but not least, the correct allocation of credits, strictly based on the overall working hours of the students, assuming 60 credits per academic year and a corridor of about 1,500 to 1,800 working hours per year and student, which translates into 25-30 hours of student work time per credit, counting not only contact hours in class but also time for class preparation, research, theses, etc.

The system works well if there is appropriate qualitative evaluation of student performance (grading) as well as proper embedding in a quality culture which is in line with the European Standards and Guidelines (see quality assurance below). And, credits should be linked with learning outcomes. A student should know from the very beginning what he/she will know, understand and be able to do upon graduation. In other words it should be clear which kinds of knowledge, skills and competences a study programme will convey, thus giving a clear and realistic picture of the overall qualifications acquired.

Another transparency document, the Diploma Supplement is closely linked with ECTS. The DS contains detailed information about the length, content, level, quality and other important aspects of a study programme thus providing a future employer or university admissions officer with the necessary information about a personś individual learning path and qualifications, and the learning culture behind it.

When it comes to recognition, the Lisbon Recognition Convention plays an important role in trying to structure a playing field where arbitrariness is widespread. It is a common problem that recognition of study periods abroad lies in the hands of individual university staff members, who very often refuse to honour a qualification acquired elsewhere, without bringing forth valid arguments. Matters would improve significantly, if recognition officers abided by the "substantial difference clause" of the LRC, which says that, unless there is a substantial difference in the quality or content of the study programme at the

host institution, recognition should be the rule and not the exception.

According to stocktaking, ECTS, the LRC and the Diploma Supplement are also widely in place, although we know from practical experience, that implementation is not always correct (e.g., incorrect calculation of student workload or allocation of credits).

More information:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm

3.3 Quality Assurance

The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance worked out by the E4, (consisting of ENQA – European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education, EUA – European University Association, EURASHE – European Association of Higher Education Institutions, and ESU – European Student Union), constitutes an important and decisive instrument to provide convergence for the diverse quality assurance cultures in Europe. This development paved the way for the foundation of EQAR, the European Quality Assurance Register, in March 2008. The application by Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies for inclusion on the Register is evaluated by a group of QA experts plus governmental observers. So far 3 agencies have been admitted and further applications are pending.

Relevant websites:

- http://www.eqar.eu/
- http://www.enqa.net/about-enqa.html
- http://www.esib.org/
- http://www.eua.be/
- http://www.eurashe.be/

International academic cooperation will not function until a "zone of trust" is created so one can rely on the quality of the academic programmes and research offered by a partner or host institution. Quality assurance plays a vital role in building trust. Nowadays higher education institutions and their programmes are either accredited and undergo re-accreditation at regular intervals, or they have to undergo evaluation procedures at regular intervals. These, according to the European Standards and Guidelines, consist of internal and external evaluation (peer review) of teaching and research, including also the students in the evaluation measures.

The degree of implementation of quality assurance is not as high as the one of the degree system or recognition, but is well on its way, with external evaluation lagging a bit behind.

3.4 Mobility Enhancing Measures

Promoting Mobility is a multi-faceted affair, as it not only includes financial incentives, guaranteed recognition, linguistic preparation, information and counselling services, functioning university partnerships etc., but also battling a host of obstacles which more often than not fall under the responsibility of authorities outside the remit of higher education. These include immigration law, tax law, pension rights, insurance issues, labour law, and the like.

Some of the recommendations worked out by the Bologna Coordination Group on Mobility include the transportability of grants and loans, diversification of funding, including the opportunity to become mobile in all curricula, guaranteeing fair recognition, reward mechanisms for staff going abroad, all the way to preparing national action plans for mobility with benchmarks for outgoing and incoming mobility, etc.

The Bologna Follow-up Group in the draft Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communique suggests that by "2020 at least 20% of those graduation in the countries of the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad."

Mobility, is definitely one of the pillars of the Bologna Process and also an end, and it will be a yardstick of success for the completion of the European Higher Education Area.

3.5 Life Long Learning

In times where people change jobs ever more often during their active lives, further training and education offers are a must. The need for more flexible learning paths will keep growing in the future to allow for re- and further training so people can react to the ever-faster changing needs of the labour markets and the demographic development with more older and fewer younger people and a more mobile workforce, including migrants and immigrants.

In this context the recognition of prior learning is becoming more and more important. Much of this learning will belong to informal and non-formal education. We need certification centres to assess the qualifications acquired this way and to make sure that learners will not have to

duplicate their educational efforts, thus losing valuable time.

It is easier for more recent and flexible institutions, like the universities of applied science, to adapt their offers to changing needs, than for the established traditional universities. But the latter will also have to offer further training programmes and programmes for part-time students or they will lose out in the competition for students in the future.

As higher education institutions in general will have to adopt clear strategies and profiles for themselves, forced to do so by scarcer funding and changing demographics, LLL-offers will play an important role in such deliberations.

3.6 Attractiveness/Global Setting

While raising the attractiveness of higher education institutions to prime the pump of academic exchange within Europe, it was clear from the very beginning that it was not the intention to build a Fortress Europe in academia. It would be counter-productive for Europe to do without the innovative ideas from other parts of the world, and it would be unfair to our global partners to keep them from the rich trough of linguistic and cultural diversity offered by our higher education institutions. Both sides will profit extensively from the prolific exchange of ideas and the joint academic projects.

There is such vivid interest in joining the Bologna Process that during the next ministerial conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, at the end of April 2009, the first so-called Policy Forum with delegations from countries outside the Bologna Area will take place. Active interest and Bologna activities can be reported from the Americas – North, South, and Central, from Australia, where a similar Process was started, China, Kazakhstan and Israel. Membership or any kind of special status are not foreseen, but every third country is invited and free to adopt the Bologna action lines into their higher education systems.

A Bologna working group on the European Higher Education Area in a Global Setting was set up to work out policies for cooperation with third countries. These policies revolve around information services, promotion of the Bologna Process Recognition issues, policy dialogue, and cooperation based on partnership.

4. A Look Ahead: Present and Future Challenges

4.1 General Remarks

In discussing present and future challenges I will partly pick up on issues dealt with above, especially in light of the fact that none of the action lines has been fully implemented in all 46 countries party to the BP. This is one big challenge.

Another one rests in the fact that Bologna is not only about new policies and instruments but that it implies and brings with it a wholly different approach towards such issues as managing universities, student-teacher relationships, ministry-university interaction, the new roles of higher education institutions, how they interact with society, etc.

These issues involve face-abouts and paradigm changes, often constituting a thorough break with cherished traditions, which takes more time than the ten year deadline set at the beginning. Bologna does not end in 2010. 2010 is a milestone and the next milestone is 2020, which will hopefully see full implementation of the present action lines. Yet Bologna is a process and my assumption is that it will constantly evaluate and re-invent itself, even after 2020.

4.2 Increasing and Deepening at the Same Time

With 46 Bologna countries we are only 3 countries (Belarus, Monaco, San Marino) shy of the 49 potential members which meet the membership prerequisite for being party to the European Cultural Convention.

Yet this remaining geographical enlargement, even considering interaction and exchange with third countries, seems like small fry compared to the challenge of fully and correctly implementing the original action lines and policies listed under chapter 3 above, and simultaneously dealing with the additional tools, such as learning outcomes, and especially the all-encompassing National Qualifications Frameworks, which look like they will be home-work for the entire next decade up to 2020.

4.3 Student-Teacher Relations

The paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning becomes evident in many aspects of Bologna.

In ascertaining student workload and allocating credits to classes, teachers, Deans, heads of

curricular committees and students need to cooperate to arrive at realistic solutions.

In quality assurance students need to be involved in assessing teaching, research and also in external reviews.

Teacherś roles are changing from providing facts and knowledge in frontal lectures to coaching students and teaching them how to study, organize themselves and where to find the materials and information they need to progress in their studies.

The "metamorphosis" is from the "sage on the stage to the guide on the side" as one Bologna expert once put it. This does not mean at all that the role of teachers is becoming less important. I would say it is becoming even more important as the relationship with students becomes closer and the responsibility for them bigger. Yet what is new is that the students are moving more towards the centre of the higher education system.

4.4 Imbedding Mobility in the Institutional Strategy

International relations at a higher education institution are typically managed by individual "pioneers", who are often members of faculty or study abroad offices. Yet, such essential aspects as recognition or finance are taken care of by persons or bodies elsewhere in the institution, who often regard internationalization as additional work for which they do not have sufficient financial or human resources nor the necessary training and motivation. To improve mobility for both students and teachers and to ensure that mobility and transnational cooperation projects are facilitated and bring appropriate rewards for the persons involved internationalization must be firmly imbedded in an institutionś strategy and profile. All levels, from the Rectors to Deans, professors, students and administrative units of a higher education institution must support and promote the international activities to guarantee their added value and ultimate success.

The demographic development in the coming decades, with an aging population, and more mobile students both within and between countries, will create the need for higher education institutions to concentrate on the offers they excel in. They will have to do a SWOT analysis, identifying their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to find out which mission, strategy, and profile will make them attractive to potential students and competitive in order to survive in the ever tougher higher education landscape.

4.5 Avoiding Mobility-Strangling Curricula

The freezing of bachelor programmes at 3 years in many Bologna countries and the attempt at packing as much of the former longer, one-cycle, programmes into the new undergraduate cycle as possible has led to a stifling of mobility. This is absurd, as mobility is one of the means and ends of the Bologna Process. Mobility can take place also after finishing a bachelorś degree, by moving to a different country for work or further studies (vertical mobility) but it must also be possible during bachelor studies (horizontal mobility) and, naturally, in doctoral programmes.

This is why the Bologna Follow-up Group is proposing in the draft Leuven Communiqué to create opportunities for mobility within each of the three cycles. The advantages and added value of a study-related stay abroad are too important for the personal, intellectual and academic development of a student to be ignored. It is essential to provide for mobility opportunities especially in the bachelor programmes because many students will not graduate studies right away, but will enter the labour market and will not embark upon master studies until later in their lives, if at all.

4.6 "Multidimensional Transparency Tools"

The consistently poor showing of European Universities in international rankings (especially Shanghai and Times Higher Education rankings) has started a discussion on a ranking or rather classification system which is tailored to the specificities of European higher education institutions. The EU is funding a research project on indicators for such a system to make the diversity of European HEI more transparent. And there are several other current initiatives to develop such a so called "multi-dimensional transparency tool". Most HEIs are against a ranking system with its "naming and shaming" characteristics, and the Bologna Follow-up Group has decided to adopt a rather toned-down proposal for the Leuven Communiqué in which the involvement of the key stakeholders is asked for. A decision on a specific model will most probably not be taken before the next official Bologna Ministerial Meeting in Bucharest, in 2012.

4.7 Internationalization "at Home"

As a last challenge, and there are certainly more, I would like to touch upon a concept which is only

slowly making its presence known in academia: "Internationalization at home". However generous and all-encompassing mobility promotion actions may be, there will always be students and teacher, who, for various reasons, will not be able to spend time at another institution abroad or even in the home country. Those reasons could be of a financial nature, family-related, disease or disability, etc. These people could also enjoy an international experience at their home institutions if the presence of incoming students and visiting professors is promoted and supported.

5. Bologna is here to stay

After 10 years of Bologna and building the European Higher Education Area it is safe to say that we are beyond the point of no return. What European higher education needed at the turn of the century was a change from traditions and practices that had governed higher education over decades and were not useful in dealing with a host of new challenges our HEI were and are still facing. These changes have been equally important and necessary for both national educational policies and for internationalization.

The various action lines employed to bring about the changes needed must be fully implemented before the full benefits of the Bologna Process can be reaped. This is why the next few years towards 2020 will first and foremost be used to consolidate the results achieved and to render all action lines fully operational.

Europeanizing higher education and building a European higher education area rest upon the pillars of trust, transparency, and stakeholder partnership. These concepts embody the true spirit of Bologna. It constitutes a vital and urgently needed action to equip our students, teachers, and researchers with the competencies and qualifications they need to help our societies survive economic crises and international competition.

More sources of information:

- www.bologna2009benelux.org: website of the Bologna Secretariat (containing basic documents, information on the Ministerial Conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, working group reports, country reports, etc.)
- www.oead.at/bologna: Austrian Bologna Contact Point
- www.grants.at: Austrian database for scholarships and research grants

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