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THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AND ITS PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: *At the end of the first decade of this new millennium, we have reached the deadline set for the Bologna process. It is therefore an appropriate moment to look back to see where we have progressed and where we have fallen short of our aspirations. The Bologna Process was a major reform created with the claimed goal of providing responses to issues such as the public responsibility for higher education and research, higher education governance, the social dimension of higher education and research, and the values and roles of higher education and research in modern, globalized, and increasingly complex societies with the most demanding qualification needs.*

Key words: *Bologna, process, Europe, high education.*

1. Introduction

The Bologna Process aims at constructing and launching a European Higher Education Area by 2010, setting an entirely new course for higher education in Europe. This vision was introduced in the *Sorbonne Declaration* (May 1998), elaborated in the *Bologna Declaration* (June 1999), and expanded further in the course of two ministerial conferences in Prague (May 2001) and Berlin (September 2003) respectively. The Bologna Process is truly a pan-European project, without precedent in the history of the continent. By May 2005, the Bologna Process extended to 45 signatory countries with the inclusion of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The ministers responsible for higher education met in Bergen to discuss the mid-term achievements of the Bologna Process. The commissioned *Stocktaking Report* was submitted by the BFUG for the occasion. The Bergen Conference also marked the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

2. Recent Aspects regarding Bologna Process

The London Ministerial meeting, held on 17 and 18 May 2007, provided a landmark in establishing the first legal body to be created through the Bologna process – the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). This is to become a register of quality assurance agencies that comply with the European Standards and Guidelines, and are therefore legitimate to work in the European Higher Education Area. London also saw developments in two key areas – the social dimension, where Ministers agreed to develop national action plans with monitoring of their

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impact, and the global dimension, where Ministers agreed on a strategy to develop the global dimension of European higher education.

The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial meeting, held on 28 and 29 April 2009, took stock of the achievements of the Bologna process and laid out the priorities for the European Higher Education Area for the next decade. Looking back to ten years of European higher education reform, Ministers emphasised the achievements of the Bologna process, highlighting in particular the increased compatibility and comparability of European education systems through the implementation of structural changes and the use of ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. Acknowledging that the European Higher Education Area is not yet a reality, the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué also established the priorities for the decade until 2020.

At present, 46 European countries and their higher education institutions are working to meet the requirements of the European Higher Education Area; this vast network will facilitate the production and transmission of knowledge in the region, increase the global competitiveness of European higher education, and substantially enhance students' prospects.

Making provisions for higher education in legislation is an intricate exercise given the various stakeholders involved in the process. The task is more difficult because of the lack of a pan-European consensus, let alone within the European Union (EU), on how different stakeholders should contribute to covering ever-increasing costs. An important element in a nation's overall provision for the education of its citizens, higher education has a long history, and its institutional and personal participants usually represent the social structure of a given state: many members of national parliaments, particularly in smaller states, would claim some expertise in the sector. It is not at all surprising, then, that the reform process is far from smooth sailing, as many interests of one sort or another are at stake.

The clear political and economic aim of the Bologna Process, as supported by the European Commission, is making the EU, indeed Europe as a whole, the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. The related, if subordinate, educational aim is a mobile, highly trained workforce attainable by enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education institutions.

Until the advent of the Bologna Process, public funding of higher education was designed to meet the needs of individual countries for highly educated and trained specialists, professionals, academics, and 'generalists'. In some countries, to a markedly smaller extent in recent years, public funding guaranteed the provision of higher education as a public good. Legislation, in its various forms, gave effect to these aims.

One question before us is how far legislation in itself helps to achieve the goals of the Bologna Process: Is it the catalyst for the achievement of these goals? Does it reflect progress towards the goals made by institutions? In some cases, it is clear that legislation forces changes in existing structures; in other cases, it reflects in a formal way what institutions and stakeholders in education already wish to do. Whichever path followed, it is important that legislation does not impede the Bologna objectives from being attained.

No international law or treaty supports the Bologna Process as such. Although the concept of developing a framework convention or a set of legally binding principles to underpin the emerging

European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Research Area (ERA) is by no means new, so far the process relies on the voluntary commitment of Member States. This is not to say that higher education law has developed entirely spontaneously or in an un-coordinated way.

As an intergovernmental organisation, the Council of Europe through its *Legislative Reform Programme in Higher Education and Research* (LRP) was instrumental in providing expertise and assistance to countries in transition to reform their legislation and practice in higher education, well before the Bologna Process came into being. Essentially, countries emerging from a communist or socialist past, where universities seen as tools of the state had little autonomy, received LRP assistance.

Through a series of study visits, workshops, and publications, the LRP also helped to inform Western countries contributing to it about the developing higher education systems of countries having recently acceded to the Bologna Process and in several cases to the EU.

In general, the LRP welcomed the concept of an overall framework law on education, setting the overall structure, key individual rights, and government responsibilities, especially in federal constitutions. One of the first tasks of the LRP was to explain the then lack of a European norm for the organisation of studies, a choice between the Atlantic or 'stage' and Central European models.

In order to ease the transition from one system to another, legislation often fixes a deadline after which no study programmes of the older type will be accredited or authorised. This varies between countries but in all cases assumes that the final cadre of students graduating under the old system will do so before 2010. With the exception of those with very flexible pre-existing legal frameworks, most countries have adopted or are in the process of adopting new legislation to enable the achievement of Bologna Process goals.

The notable exception concerns joint degrees at second cycle, which will require changed regulations and practices regarding accreditation and quality assurance. Also, some new Bologna Process member-states need to make considerable progress in reforming their university structures, to allow for the easy adoption of ECTS and for internal as well as external mobility, and to enhance the appeal and competitiveness of European higher education.

It should also be stated clearly that whatever changes are made to education or higher education laws, until other obstacles to mobility (including visa regimes) are removed or reduced, there would be no real mobility of students or staff across the wider Europe, and no possibility of mounting joint degrees with countries outside the EU in any meaningful sense. Whatever views countries reasonably take about protecting their national security, to deny effective academic interchange through immigration controls seems a regression to former times. Obviously, it is a comment, but there needs to be a closer link between higher education and immigration policies, just as that between GATS negotiations and higher education, if the Bologna Process is really to succeed outside the EU.

In our opinion the Bologna Process has been driving forward the most important reforms in higher education in the modern era. The European Commission remains a committed member of the Bologna Process, as we see this unique form of European inter-governmental and interinstitutional cooperation as essential to the underpinning of the dynamic knowledge societies and economies in which our citizens can achieve personal

fulfilment and prosper. The Bologna decade is also drawing to a close as Europe, like the rest of the world, faces unprecedented challenges in confronting the global financial crisis. Whatever measures are taken to tackle the financial sector, the long-term solution for ensuring dynamic and prosperous societies depends on the quality of our education systems. The Lisbon strategy is therefore more necessary than ever to ensure sustainable economic and social development, and this is a key period to reinforce our commitment to and investment in high quality education at all levels.

3. A Possible Conclusion

While the Bologna process has clearly brought a convergence of models of degree structure, it is important to consider the extent and impact of national variations in the emerging European Higher Education Area. Some of these variations apply to specific disciplines and fields of study, while others are a continuation of differentiation between academic and professional qualifications in the newly established Bologna degrees. Whatever their practice, all countries face serious challenges in adapting to fast-changing societal demands, and ensuring that qualifications – in particular those of the first cycle – give access to the labour market.

A significant number of countries have not yet taken all the steps to modernise their vocational education system in line with the Bologna reforms – despite the fact that these reforms are conceived, at least in theory, as part of a coherent response to the rapidly changing society and labour market. However, a number of countries consider that short-cycle programmes do not require any adaptation, and the issue is rather to be seen in terms of the articulation of programmes and qualifications within the overall system.

Through the lifetime of the Bologna Process, the ECTS system has clearly established itself as a central element in the process of making European higher education more transparent and understandable. The aspiration to create a European Higher Education Area was agreed a decade later, and since then ECTS has gradually developed to become a core instrument supporting its implementation. Under the system credits are awarded to individual students upon successful completion of the learning activities required by a formal period of study.

The Bologna Process, which began with a declaration in 1999, has been an important catalyst for change within European universities.

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