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The Bologna Process: Perspectives for the future

INTRODUCTION

The Bologna Process is the most important and wide-ranging reform of higher education in Europe since the immediate aftermath of 1968. The ultimate aim of the Process is to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 in which staff and students can move with ease and have fair recognition of their qualifications. This overall goal is reflected in the six main goals defined in the 1999 Bologna Declaration:

- a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, including the implementation of the Diploma Supplement;
- a system essentially based on two main cycles:
 - a first cycle relevant to the labour market;
 - a second cycle requiring the completion of the first cycle;
- a system of accumulation and transfer of credits;
- the mobility of students, teachers, researchers, etc;
- co-operation in quality assurance;
- the European dimension of higher education.

An important goal of the Process is thus to move higher education in Europe towards a more transparent and mutually recognised system which would place the diversified national systems into a common frame based on three outcome levels – Bachelor, Master and Doctoral - and recognised different paths according to which they were achieved.

The Ministerial 2001 meeting in Prague took stock of progress in the move towards a European Higher Education Area and also gave further impetus to the Process by addressing a limited number of new areas. This is less a shift in priorities and attention than an expansion of the Process to a number of new topics, or at least by giving certain topics more emphasis. The Ministers confirmed the orientations of Bologna and in stronger terms underlined the importance of higher education for democratic values and the value of a diversity of cultures and languages as well as of higher education systems.

An important step forward was the actual recognition of students as “competent, active and constructive partners” and the emphasis on co-operation with higher education institutions, which was in a symbolic way demonstrated by the “dialogue” between Ministers, European higher education institutions and students in Prague. The students were instrumental in

bringing in the aspect of the social dimension of the Process and the recognition of education as a public good and a public responsibility.

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

In this overview of developments and perspectives of the Bologna Process, the following elements will be considered:

- The degree system,
- Joint degrees,
- Credit transfer and accumulation,
- Quality assessment,
- Recognition,
- Autonomous institutions,
- Consequences for national legislation on higher education.
- Stock-taking and milestones
- New members

Each element will be mentioned only briefly.

BACHELOR LEVEL DEGREES

In Prague, Ministers noted that in many countries bachelors and master's degrees, or comparable two cycle degrees can be obtained at universities as well as at other higher education institutions. Programmes leading to a degree may, and indeed should, have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs as concluded at the Helsinki seminar on bachelor level degrees (February 2001). Main recommendations from the Helsinki seminar are:

Common denominators for European bachelor-level degrees:

- A bachelor-level degree is a higher education qualification the extent of which is 180 to 240 credits (ECTS). It normally takes three to four years of full-time study to complete the degree. Learning to learn skills should be an essential part of any bachelor-level degree.
- Bachelor-level degrees can be taken at either traditional universities or at professionally oriented higher education institutions. Programmes leading to the degree may have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs.
- In order to increase transparency it is important that the specific orientation and profile and learning outcomes of a given qualification are included in its title and explained on the Diploma Supplement issued to the student.

Even bachelor degrees which serve as an intermediate qualification preparing students for further study should be based on a proper curriculum. They should not only be seen as a part

of a longer curriculum, as some students may wish to change direction or to choose a graduate programme or specialisation offered at another institution.

MASTER LEVEL DEGREES

An EUA Survey on Master Degrees, September 2002 has proposed common denominators for European master-level degrees:

- A Master degree should normally require the completion of 300 ECTS credits, of which at least 60 should be obtained at the graduate level in the area of specialisation.
- Possible patterns:
 - 180 credits Bachelor + 120 credits Master,
 - 240 credits Bachelor + 90/120 credits Master
(or at least 60 credits at graduate level),
 - 300 credits master (integrated programme).
- Both academic and professional Master degrees may be established.

These proposals will be discussed at the Academic Convention in Graz in May 2003 and Considered by Ministers in their Berlin Meeting in September.

JOINT DEGREES

An EUA survey on joint degrees (September 2002) focuses on the development of joint study programmes and joint degrees:

A joint study programme is a programme jointly developed and run by two or more institutions in different countries. Students study parts of the programme at different institutions, their periods of study and exams are automatically recognised by participating institutions, teachers are exchanged between institutions.

The joint study program should lead to a joint degree. The survey shows, however, that presently national laws and regulations often hinder the awarding of a joint degree (because of formal requirements in national legislations, such as requirements concerning teaching language, diplomas, etc).

The next Ministerial Meeting in Berlin September 2003 probably will suggest that national Governments adjust their legislation to make joint degrees possible, as they are seen as one way of securing the European dimension in the Higher Education Area.

CREDIT TRANSFER AND ACCUMULATION

The Zurich Conference in October 2002 demonstrated that Europe's universities recognise the importance of credit transfer and accumulation for the future development of the EHEA and accept their own responsibilities in this process. This means that on the basis of the key

features agreed in Zurich institutions need to be able to apply ECTS in a transparent but flexible way taking into account their own specific mission and priorities.

Over the last decade, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) has been successfully introduced in Socrates ERASMUS. Primarily for facilitating European mobility, ECTS has therefore been used as a credit transfer system, impacting upon a relatively small number of students. The further development of ECTS into a credit accumulation system at national level means mainstreaming ECTS into a generalised credit system for the emerging European Higher Education Area. The objectives for the ECTS will then be:

As a credit transfer system:

- to facilitate transfer of students between European countries, and in particular to enhance the quality of student mobility in ERASMUS and thus to facilitate academic recognition
- to promote key aspects of the European dimension in Higher Education

As an accumulation system:

- to support widespread curricular reform in national systems
- to enable widespread mobility both inside systems (at institutional and national level) and internationally
- to allow transfer from outside the higher education context, thus facilitating Lifelong Learning and the recognition of informal and non-formal learning, and promoting greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes
- to facilitate access to the labour market
- to enhance the transparency and comparability of European systems, therefore also to promote the attractiveness of European higher education towards the outside world

As a credit transfer and accumulation system, the key goals of ECTS will be:

- to improve transparency and comparability of study programmes and qualifications
- to facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance systems will play a vital role in ensuring high quality standards and facilitate the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe.

Existing systems vary in mechanisms and procedures. Quality assurance systems should however include the following elements and procedures in each member state:

- A quality culture in the higher education institutions.
- An independent body responsible for quality assurance on the national level.
- A system of evaluation (and accreditation) of courses, study programmes and higher education institutions, which may include internal assessments, participation by students and reviews by external peer groups.

Co-operation between national quality assurance agencies will be an essential factor.

RECOGNITION

The recognition of qualifications should be based on the general provisions of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Ratification and implementation of the Convention will be expected of all states taking part in the Bologna Process.

Main points of the Lisbon Convention are:

- Each country shall recognise qualifications from other countries as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system unless there are substantial differences.
- All countries shall provide information on the institutions and programmes belonging to their higher education systems.
- All countries shall appoint a national information centre, one important task of which is to offer advice on the recognition of foreign qualifications.
- All countries shall encourage their higher education institutions to issue the Diploma Supplement to their students to facilitate recognition.

AUTONOMOUS INSTITUTIONS

The Bologna Process builds on co-operation and trust between national educational systems and between higher education institutions in Europe. The Bologna Declaration refers to the European universities as partners in the process, underlining their autonomy.

This implies that higher education institutions must be given the freedom they need to carry out their mission and they must be in control of their own system.

Autonomous faculties within the university would mean that such units could operate independently of the institutional leadership. This does not fit the Bologna picture and it may be one of the questions asked to countries wanting to join the Bologna Process.

CONSEQUENCES FOR NATIONAL LEGISLATION

National laws on higher education will have to be adjusted to realise the European Higher Education Area:

- The Bologna Declaration refers to the European universities as partners in the process, underlining their autonomy.
- Faculties within universities should not be autonomous.
- The Bologna Process assumes that students are full members of the higher education community. They should participate in the organisation and content of education.

- The Bologna Process requires adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate.
- Joint degrees should be possible.
- Independent national quality assurance systems should be introduced. The Bologna Process will build the co-operation of national quality assurance systems.
- Obstacles to free movement for university teachers and administrative staff should be overcome; periods spent in partner institutions must be recognised without prejudicing their statutory rights.

The Bologna Process is not a process moving towards a fixed goal: it is a dynamic system. This means that an effective law on higher education should only regulate that which is essential to regulate and which cannot effectively be regulated in any other way. It should be written to allow for change, remaining relevant as the higher education system develops.

STOCK-TAKING AND MILESTONES

The Goal of the Bologna Process is to achieve a European Higher Education Area by 2010.

A stock taking before 2010 will probably be considered by Ministers in their Berlin Meeting in September 2003. The stock taking may be based on certain milestones: What “Bologna goals” should be achieved by what time.

For example:

- Requiring that institutional autonomy and student participation be a characteristic of the higher education system of all countries at an early stage.
- Introducing a 2-tier degree system.
- Provision for an independent quality assurance agency.
- Ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
- Opening up for joint degrees.

Reaching milestones of this type would probably require Decisions by Parliament. The signature of the Minister of Education in Bologna was only a first step.

NEW MEMBERS

At the Berlin Conference, Ministers may review the geographical and institutional framework for the European Higher Education Area.

The European Cultural Convention could be a meaningful way to define the geographical scope of the EHEA. However, there may be requirements concerning higher education policy in countries applying to join the Process. Such requirements probably will coincide with the milestones set for the partner in the Process. Applications may be assessed according to the milestones of the stock taking. In the meantime, applicants could be invited to present their higher education policies in the light of the Bologna Process and outline what reforms they plan to undertake to meet the goals of the Process.