

Bologna Beyond 2010: Looking Backward, Looking Forward

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO at the NAFSA annual conference, I was discussing the Bologna Process and what it would be like in 2010, “when we would all wake up one cold January morning and discover life in the brand new European Higher Education Area (EHEA).” That morning has arrived (and it is cold) and since the word January comes from Janus, the two-headed Roman god of beginnings and endings, it seems an appropriate moment to look back to what has been achieved and look forward to what still lies ahead.

A Quick Reminder

Let’s remind ourselves quickly about how the Bologna Process came about in 1999 when higher education systems all over Europe were struggling to modernize in response to a changing environment. Shared problems called for shared solutions, and the Bologna Process developed into an unprecedented landmark reform with 10 action lines and a 2010 deadline to restructure and harmonize historically diverse systems. The 29 signatory countries became 46, representing 5,600 institutions and 31 million students.

The main goal of the Bologna Process is to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to promote the European system of Higher Education worldwide through tools that enhance the employability and mobility of people and boost global attractiveness. While it was undoubtedly inspired by the Erasmus experience* of interuniversity cooperation, it also introduced the idea of competition in the very early stages, a reality that still sits uncomfortably in many university environments.

Global Bologna

While the principal focus in the beginning was on the internal dimension and putting the European house in order, the Bologna Process has very quickly acquired

*EDITOR’S NOTE: *The Erasmus program is a European Union cooperation and mobility initiative to promote European higher education.*

an important external dimension as other countries across the world have taken a strong interest in the European response. International competitiveness is now accompanied by international dialogue and connections to other world regions.

The Bologna Process has given an identity to European higher education, although that identity may not yet be completely formed or understood, and to that end, a new information and promotion strategy is currently being developed to communicate Bologna outside the EHEA both for the purposes of cooperation and competition.

The growing interest in Bologna worldwide has also led to the creation of a global policy dialogue that took place back to back with the 2009 ministerial meeting in Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve in Belgium. It included 15 countries from all over the world that gathered to discuss the effects of Bologna in their countries as well as the broader role and identity of higher education in the new environment: Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Tunisia, and the United States. The dialogue will continue and the countries will meet again at the March 2010 meeting.

In many ways, the Bologna Process is offering new instruments and models for other world regions seeking collaborative agreements and solutions. If Erasmus has been hailed as the most successful European initiative ever, the Bologna Process has

achieved in 10 years what many national governments failed to achieve in decades, a policy for reform and a framework of reference, that is now not only transforming European higher education but is having tangible impacts beyond its own borders.

The domino effect of reform in the different countries has been activated by the mechanisms of this voluntary intergovernmental agreement. The reform process is driven by the different stakeholder groups and structured via communiqués announced at biannual ministerial meetings where results of the previous period are evaluated and priorities for the next two years set. The priorities are transformed into national reform and implemented by the institutions but it is essential to remember that this happens in different ways and at different speeds in each of the signatory countries and individual institutions will interpret and implement the reform according to their capacity and ambition. As has been said many times before, it is a process of harmonization not homogenization.

Massive Changes

There can be no doubt that there have been massive changes and the most important to date has been structural reform. European higher education has converged into three cycles—bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees—but with diversification in length of study. Bachelor's degrees last between three and four years, master's between one and two years, and doctoral studies between three and four years.

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) has not only been adopted as the standard but has since been linked to learning outcomes, which have been collaboratively developed to create a common language and frame of reference at the level of both cycles and disciplines. Learning outcomes do not sound particularly exciting or powerful, but they have the potential to revolutionize the way in which universities organize educational delivery as well bring greater transparency, recognition and flexibility across the Bologna agenda. They transform approaches to curricular design and assessment, provide building blocks for qualifications frameworks and transmit valuable information to employers or professional bodies. They act as a tool

for greater integration across the sectors in lifelong learning and make an important contribution to mobility both for study and employment purposes. Credits and learning outcomes are key tools for the development of student-centered learning, which has the potential to revolutionize the way in which universities organize educational delivery.

The Diploma Supplement, a standard template to describe qualifications, is increasingly being issued along with the final qualification and progress is being made in all countries to develop a qualifications framework that describes national qualifications according to a commonly defined set of descriptors and these will be inserted into an overarching European framework, connecting the different national education systems.

The last 10 years have seen a convergence of degree structures, credit frameworks, learning outcomes, and descriptors, but there has never been the objective of standardised qualifications. As has been often repeated, there is no single Bologna degree, but a range of Bologna-compliant degrees that fit the overall structures but have emerged in line with national and institutional preferences and traditions.

Bologna Process Web Resources

Official Bologna Process Web site

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/Bologna/>

also for European Qualifications Framework

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/ef/ef.asp>

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

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

Diploma Supplement

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc1239_en.htm

Purchasing the Bologna Handbook

<http://www.bologna-handbook.com/>

European Quality Assurance

<http://www.eqar.eu/>

Information on quality assured and accredited higher education institutions (in progress)

<http://www.grossroads.eu/about-grossroads>

Information on Study in Europe

<http://ec.europa.eu/education/study-in-europe/>

Lisbon Recognition Convention

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Recognition/LRC_en.asp

The Bologna Process has often accelerated internationalization processes in the institutions resulting in stronger institutional cooperation in integrated curricula for double and joint degrees. There has also been a significant increase in teaching in English in European universities, particularly at master's level, to facilitate mobility for both student exchange and student recruitment, as the new European master's degrees begin to establish themselves on the global higher education market.

In a Europe, where many higher education systems had no quality assurance systems in place, there is now extensive European cooperation in quality assurance that has led to the development of European standards and guidelines providing a framework for the creation of the different national systems. And in

a Europe where mobility was often hampered by lack of recognition principles, the Lisbon Recognition Convention gives the right to fair recognition and provides transparent and coherent criteria.

There can be no doubt that European higher education has undergone significant transformation in the space of one decade.

Messy Realities

So, the new European university has readable and comparable degrees, operates a credit system linked to learning outcomes, places the student at the centre of the educational process, issues the Diploma Supplement to all its graduates, has its own internal quality assurance mechanisms, is externally accredited by a quality assurance agency, is part of a system that has developed a national

qualifications framework, and has fully implemented the Lisbon Recognition convention.

However, 46 countries and 5,600 institutions with a wide range of higher education traditions across the EHEA are all at different phases of implementation and there is significant diversity in national and institutional contexts and response capacities. Reality at ground level is much messier than the official government reports and declarations.

While the structural reforms are in place across Europe, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed in the next decade. The first objective will be completion of the reforms not only at legislative level, but ensuring they are properly implemented and firmly embedded in the institutions.

It must be said that in many institutions there has often been only a cosmetic introduction of the reforms. They may have been forced to adopt the new structures, but have then failed to rework their programs, design new curricula in line with new professions and interact with employers. The bachelor's degrees are not universally accepted as an entry point to the labor market and while many consider the master's degree as the real exit point, there is much confusion in the proliferation and variety of master's degrees. Doctoral reform is at the very early stages. Cramming old courses into new structures has also had the effect of reducing mobility and the next decade will focus on guaranteeing mobility at all level of study.

ECTS as a tool for measuring student workload and linking to student outcomes is often misunderstood and seen as a bureaucratic requirement rather than an opportunity to innovate. Issuing the Diploma Supplement to all graduates has not yet become standard practice and national qualifications frameworks are still to be implemented in most countries. Quality assurance mechanisms may be in place but a quality assurance culture for institutional learning and improvement is not yet embedded. The Lisbon recognition principles are not always in line with national legislation and recognition of degrees is often a long and cumbersome process.

Reaching the Bologna goals at institutional level requires culture change and that

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Special Focus Network online at
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is the biggest challenge of all. Culture change takes time, it requires energy and commitment from leadership, but it also calls for professional development and financial resources, which have often been lacking.

It cannot be ignored that the Bologna Process has also generated confusion and hostility. Overcoming these challenges and maintaining momentum will be essential to avoid the risk of “Bologna burnout” among stakeholders that have been instrumental in driving the process forward.

Beyond the internal and external dimension, the social dimension of the Bologna Process is mentioned less frequently in international discussions, but it is gaining in importance and sense of urgency. The questions of access to higher education and lifelong learning are not yet high priorities in most European institutional agendas and will become a major policy challenge in the next decade to ensure higher education is meeting societal needs.

Bologna 2020

It is clear that, despite the remarkable progress of the last decade, there is still a long way to go before the Bologna goals of employability, mobility, and global competitiveness are reached and the EHEA becomes a reality. The Bologna process represents a major modernization agenda for Europe and it is destined to go deeper and broader in the next decade.

An important new tool decided at the 2009 ministerial meeting is data collection and evaluation which will increase understanding of the changes and inform future decisions. An independent assessment of the last decade will be presented at the next ministerial conference and policy forum March 11–12, 2010, in Budapest, Hungary and Vienna, Austria. Indicators to measure mobility and the social dimension will be in place by 2012.

Future institutional reforms will need to move from structural change to enhancement and modernization of the curricula and much emphasis will be put on ensuring optimisation in use of ECTS and learning outcomes, introduction of student-centered learning, employability especially at bachelor's level, and access and quality of mobility.

One target for mobility has already been set and that is 20 percent of graduates should have had a study or placement abroad by 2020. Mobility studies should provide data on mobility between cycles and countries, mobility and employability, mobility in and beyond Europe, instruments for quality of and access to mobility.

Data collection and evaluation should also provide input for the social dimension to ensure Europe's student bodies reflect the diversity of its populations. Universities will be called upon to develop action plans for more flexible educational delivery accessible to a wider range of students and to realise lifelong learning through better recognition of prior learning and development of adult learning. Each country will be required to set measurable targets for increasing the participation of underrepresented groups by 2020.

The external dimension will focus on enhancing relationships between the EHEA and the rest of the world and preparing its institutions to face global challenges. A strategy will be put in place to promote the EHEA around the world and create the EHEA brand but also to ensure international dialogue and cooperation. International reputation is closely tied to international rankings and European pilot projects are being developed to create new approaches and encourage institutional diversity. Quality assurance and recognition will take on stronger international dimensions and include transnational education.

Research and innovation have also been identified as a priority and there will be emphasis on creating strong links between the EHEA and the ERA (the European Research Area). Doctoral education will receive greater attention for reform to improve careers for young researchers and enhance oppor-

tunity for mobility. Diversity in institutional research profiles will be encouraged.

An open debate that will continue throughout the next decade will be the issue of funding higher education. Higher education has been declared a public good and public responsibility and governments have made commitments to maintaining investment levels in the current global crisis. Nevertheless, European higher education funding is low compared to the United States and has often decreased in the past decade. Discussions on the levels and balances of public and private funding, in particular student fee structures, will continue in the search for a sustainable funding model for Europe.

Seeing Opportunity

The Bologna Process has been considered the greatest higher education reform ever implemented in Europe bringing about unprecedented change, and yet as it draws to its 10-year conclusion it already appears insufficient to provide the solutions that are required to make European higher education a truly global player.

Significant structural reform has been carried out and important tools for convergence have been introduced. But as the next decade begins, Europe will need to develop an even more ambitious reform agenda, driving forward and interlinking the internal, external, and social dimensions while creating the conditions for effective institutional implementation of the reforms.

Success will lie in the institutional capacity and ambition to change. Those institutions that see the Bologna Process as an opportunity rather than a threat will not only implement the changes but go beyond them to craft their own agenda to become active players in the new environment. For those who continue to resist and remain nostalgic about the past, the words of Eric Shinseki come to mind: *“If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less.”* That is surely not an option for European universities. **E**

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