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CULTURE AND EDUCATION

THE BOLOGNA PROCESS: STOCKTAKING AND PROSPECTS

NOTE

Abstract

The Bologna Process has led to fundamental changes in higher education across Europe. The launch of the EHEA in 2010 marked an important milestone on the way to an open area of higher learning with greater compatibility and comparability as well as increased international attractiveness and competitiveness of the European higher education systems. Good progress has been made in many fields, but much remains to be done in order to ensure full achievement of all Bologna goals in the next decade.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This note seeks to inform the European Parliament (EP) on the implementation status and prospects of the Bologna Process. Following the executive summary, which includes our recommendations, part 1 gives a general overview of the topics, developments and trends within the Bologna Process since 1998. Part 2 provides a progress report on the Bologna reforms and identifies achievements and future challenges in individual Bologna areas. Part 3 outlines the most important conclusions. The note is based on the most recent Bologna evaluations (2009 and 2010) and the authors' rich experience in Bologna-related matters.

In only a decade, the intergovernmental Bologna Process has, together with other modernisation agendas at EU and national level, led to a "fundamental and dramatic change in higher education" in Europe and attracted significant attention in other parts of the world. The Bologna reforms – which have, since their inception, been supported by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council within the framework of their responsibilities – were to achieve "greater compatibility and comparability" of higher education systems inside Europe and strengthen the global "attractiveness and competitiveness" of European higher education (Bologna Declaration 1999). To accomplish this, a number of goals and action lines were set to be achieved by 2010. 47 out of 50 signatories of the European Cultural Convention have meanwhile joined the Process. In 2010, the EHEA was launched and substantial progress towards the Bologna targets noted. But evaluations show that further effort is needed in various areas for the reforms to be fully completed, explaining why Ministers set 2020 as the new completion deadline of the Bologna Process.

Good progress was made in the implementation of the Bologna reforms in the past decade, particularly regarding the "architectural elements", but implementation in the signatory countries took place at varying speeds, and no country has fully completed implementation. In particular, target achievement at institutional level leaves room for improvement and the Bologna reforms are not yet fully accepted by institutions and students. This might be due to an overly "instrumental" rather than "holistic" implementation approach, and to inadequate communication of the Bologna objectives to higher education institutions and students. In Budapest/Vienna 2010, the Ministers therefore undertook to better involve these stakeholders in the future.

Fears (or hopes) that the reforms would lead to a "harmonisation" of European higher education proved unfounded. Greater comparability and convergence in certain areas (e.g. the degree architecture) came about in parallel with new divergences due to the diversity of the European higher education landscape and the differing profiles of individual higher education institutions (e.g. regarding the duration of the first two cycles) and different interpretations and practical implementation of elements of the reform (e.g. ECTS, learning outcomes).

Target achievement and future challenges also differ greatly between individual elements. The two-cycle **degree system** is now the structuring principle in all countries, but some disciplines (e.g. medicine) are not yet integrated and enrolment numbers in the new degrees are still low in some countries. Students criticise that access to the second cycle is often conditional on additional requirements. The results of the **curriculum reform** are more mixed. ECTS, learning outcomes and the Diploma Supplement are still insufficiently related to each other, and their implementation is often superficial and inconsistent across Europe. Thorough modularisation of curricula is a reality only in a minority of EHEA countries. Student-centred teaching and learning is progressing, but in no country completed, and implementation varies greatly between higher education institutions.

Excellent progress was made in **quality assurance** (QA). The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) have considerably enhanced European level quality assurance. QA systems now exist in almost all countries, though not everywhere aligned to the ESG. Only a few QA agencies have so far registered with EQAR and involvement of institutions and stakeholders (including students) must still grow. Few countries have developed a **national qualifications framework (NQF)** fully compatible with the EHEA-wide framework of qualifications. Given their importance for transparency, recognition, mobility and lifelong learning, NQFs must now be implemented, preferably by 2012, with particular attention given to the use of learning outcomes.

Insufficient **recognition** persists. Recognition instruments like ECTS and the Diploma Supplement are increasingly used in Europe, though their impact is hampered by different understandings and inconsistent implementation between countries and institutions (and even departments). Recognition is also still rarely based on learning outcomes. The Lisbon Recognition Convention has been ratified by almost all EHEA countries, but there is not yet a proper understanding of its “substantial differences” concept. The original aim to enhance the **mobility** of students (and staff) was confirmed by the 20% target set in 2010. Measurement of success is complicated by the (poor) quality of available data, but it appears that fears about a negative Bologna impact on mobility were unfounded, though mobility is very unevenly developed in the EHEA. Erasmus participation almost doubled in ten years. Some countries appear to be already close to or beyond the 20% mobility target. The inflow of degree-seeking students from non-EHEA countries grew tremendously. But obstacles to mobility persist, in areas such as recognition, administrative procedures (visas, work permits, etc) and funding, which is viewed as a major mobility deterrent for students from less wealthy backgrounds. “Mobility windows” are not yet common.

Due to a lack of precise indicators and scant monitoring, there is little solid information on achievements with regard to the **social dimension** and, in particular, higher education participation of socially and otherwise disadvantaged population groups. All EHEA countries pursue policies of participative equity, but few appear to have developed comprehensive strategies. Despite progress in participation from lower socio-economic backgrounds, there is still a considerable “social filter” in the EHEA. The evidence base on the **employability of graduates** and notably the labour market acceptance of the Bachelor degree is still not strong. Country-based studies show a good absorption of first-cycle students, especially from “professional Bachelors”, but most universities question the Bachelor as a labour-market qualifying degree, which undermines its credibility. Cooperation with employers over curricula is underway, though apparently not growing over time.

Attempts at **linking the EHEA with the European Research Area** through the introduction of more structured doctoral programmes and graduate schools have progressed, also in the form of collaborative doctoral programmes (jointly offered by universities and enterprises) and joint European doctorates. But doctoral education remains diverse and the status of doctoral candidates varies greatly across the EHEA. The **external dimension** of the EHEA is turning out to be a success. The inflow of non-EHEA students into the EHEA swelled remarkably in the past decade, and the reforms have been received positively around the world. An external strategy was adopted (2007) and two Bologna Policy Forums were held in 2009 and 2010. Deficits remain however in the global promotion of the EHEA towards third-country students.

Recommendations

1. The EP should call on all stakeholders to **keep the momentum** of the Bologna Process going and create a truly attractive and competitive EHEA. **Consolidating and completing** the existing Bologna action lines must be the first priority for the next decade. The processes of **informing and including** all stakeholders (including students) have to be further expanded and better funded in order to improve acceptance of the reforms. Also measures should be taken to make the achievements and advantages of the Bologna reforms and the support given by the EU to the Process better known to a broader public (e.g. public hearings of the EP, informational leaflets and events provided by the EP's information offices).
2. The evaluation of reform progress is hampered in some areas (e.g. social dimension, employability) by a lack of precise targets. The EP should demand that **quantitative targets**, inclusive of clearly defined **indicators**, be developed in all areas and **data collection systems** put in place in order to measure target achievement. Target achievement should be monitored at regular intervals (every two years), by independent evaluators not involved in the governance of the Bologna Process.
3. Signatory countries should integrate still missing subject areas into the **two-cycle degree system** and ensure that students completing one Bologna cycle have reasonable access to the next. **Curriculum reform must advance** by making higher education institutions describe their curricula through learning outcomes and ECTS, and by further developing the student-centred approach. In addition, the EU should promote the development of truly European curricula (e.g. European studies, European law) and joint study programmes by expanding its funding schemes such as Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus. In order to monitor labour-market access (**employability**) of Bologna-degree graduates, a Europe-wide graduate survey should regularly be conducted; further study and employment trajectories following the Bachelor degree should also be tracked. Furthermore, the EP should once again encourage the dialogue and collaboration between the world of work and higher education to jointly develop curricula, including work placements. In order to strengthen the third cycle and the link to the ERA, the EP should advocate joint doctoral schools and programmes by means of increased funding in the next generation of EU education and research programmes. The EP should continue to push for the creation of a European Industrial PhD scheme, which it had already advocated in 2009.
4. Continued efforts are required to make **mobility** the real "hallmark" of the EHEA. The EP should step up its support for mobility by increasing the financial envelope for the next phase of EU programmes and widening the geographical scope of the programmes to the entire EHEA. Signatory countries must develop mobility promotion strategies and remove obstacles to mobility (e.g. visas, portability of grants, loans and pensions). Institutions must develop mobility-friendly curricula (e.g. mobility windows, joint programmes) and improve recognition.
5. Institutions should be given support to improve **recognition and credit transfer** by implementing ECTS, learning outcomes, the DS and the LRC in a comparable and correct way across Europe (e.g. with a European Users' Guide for Recognition and European training seminars funded by the Commission). Signatory countries must ensure full and comparable introduction of **National Qualifications Frameworks** in accordance with the QF EHEA that is urgently needed to facilitate mobility, recognition and lifelong learning.

6. In order to further progress on **quality assurance** systems, the EP should urge Member States and institutions to fully implement QA systems in accordance with the ESG. QA agencies and networks must intensify cooperation and dialogue on QA with other parts of the world and develop a common understanding of QA principles. The EP should renew its invitation to the Commission to continue its support for activities in the field of QA and to present progress reports on the development of QA systems at national and European level.

7. In order to strengthen the **external dimension** of the EHEA and to promote Europe as a study destination worldwide, the EP could encourage global higher education promotion activities, particularly joint European efforts, and invite the Commission to support institutional and national promotion through a joint European promotion campaign.