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The Bologna Agreement

Part II: Mobility: (a) Promoting the mobility of students and staff
 (b) Identification of the main obstacles
 (c) Other

Mobility

Mobility of students and, to a lesser extent, members of teaching staff, has made satisfactory progress, and constitutes the key dimension of the EHEA.

The task:

(a) to further increase the number of students moving to and from more countries;
(b) to increase the number of visiting teaching staff;
(c) to overcome obstacles (visiting students' lack of money, which prevents financially disadvantaged students from taking part – lack of recognition of study courses / credit units because of differences – difficulty of obtaining visas from certain countries – lack of knowledge of foreign languages, particularly less common languages).

Problems

(a) There is a problem with the cultural-linguistic dimension of Europe in connection with mobility. To date, mobility has been almost entirely in one direction: towards countries where English is spoken or used in teaching. There is less mobility towards countries where French, German, Spanish or Italian is spoken, while countries whose languages are less spoken (Greece, Portugal, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, etc.) receive a smaller or minimal number of visiting students. The problem arises from the students themselves, who, if they are intending to go to universities in those countries, ask if teaching is conducted in English. A possible solution would be to allow more time for students going to those countries to learn, or improve their knowledge of, the relevant languages, and to give them extra money and credit units for doing so. A measure of this kind would also promote the European dimension in linguistic diversity (multilingualism), which is also an EU aim.

(b) Financial resources (scholarships, special loans) must be found so that visiting students are in a stronger financial position. This is the only way in practice to achieve the social dimension of mobility.

CONCLUSION

The emphasis on **mobility** is vastly disproportionate to the actual results of mobility. Experience has shown that one or two semesters spent by a student in one university or another does nothing to improve the level of their studies, although it does help to enhance the European dimension, which of course is important in itself.

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Part III: The Results: (a) Lessons learned
(b) Priorities in the Bologna processes
(c) Other

Introduction

There is no doubt that – like the concept of a united Europe itself – the Bologna Agreement, which ultimately aims to achieve a **(unified) European Higher Education Area (EHEA)** is an equally vast concept. As a ‘vast concept’ however, that is as an ambitious, far-reaching endeavour in a particularly sensitive, complex area with key long-term implications, combining culture, science, society, development and the very future of the countries of Europe, it is obvious that there are enormous difficulties inherent in an undertaking of this kind.

It must be stated that when in 1999 the theoretical concept of Bologna began to be put into practice in an increasing number of countries, many complex, practical problems arose that required joint solutions, something which for many reasons was not always effective. The ‘good news’ is that a fair number of those problems have been tackled satisfactorily in the eight years since then and have found a solution. The ‘bad news’ is that a fair number still remain unresolved, and it is not certain that they will be resolved satisfactorily and for all participating countries by 2010. And this is not only because they are intrinsically difficult or because they are inherently different in each country, but also because some were ‘discovered’ on the way, as was to be expected as the idea of the EHEA matured, and depending on the particular conditions prevailing in higher education in each participating country, and its political situation and national priorities.

Generally, after eight years of joint effort, work, experience and binding commitments by the participating countries, we can be optimistic that this dream is taking shape. We must, however, be aware that there is still difficult work to be done, and bold action is needed to plug loopholes, fill gaps and, sometimes, correct mistakes.

Below I will comment on some results and achievements in relation to the objectives that were set at Bologna, and also objectives that are still pending or other problems that have arisen.

1. Establishment of three levels (3/4 – 5 – 8). Most countries have established three levels undergraduate – postgraduate (master's) – doctorate.

The task:

- (a) to strengthen the third level of higher education (doctorate), because this is the only way to improve the standard of research and thus the *quality* of the EHEA;
- (b) to establish links between the levels and the needs of the employment market, in order to increase the number of jobs.

Problems

- (a) How will the four-year undergraduate course be positioned? Will the fourth year be recognised as the first year of a master's degree course?
- (b) Perhaps with the three-year undergraduate course the need for specialisation will lead most students to acquire a master's degree, increasing their years at university from three or four to five?
- (c) Will that not increase the cost of university studies?
- (d) Would a direct link with the needs of the job market not result in the decline and eventual disappearance of academic fields and subjects for which there is not much demand in the job market (literature, history, art. etc)?

2. Recognition of academic qualifications and periods of study – the Diploma Supplement

The Diploma Supplement is easy to compile and is making progress in most countries. What is difficult – and for this reason it is progressing more slowly – is the issue of recognition of academic qualifications, which presupposes the ability to compare them within a framework of qualifications that is universal throughout Europe and compatible with conditions in each country.

The task:

- (a) All countries should sign the *Lisbon Recognition Convention* (LRC) – 36 of the 45 countries have signed.
- (b) All countries should adopt a *National Qualifications Framework*, which would check recognition of qualifications and bring them into line with the European General Qualifications Framework.
- (c) *Joint degrees* should be adopted, which in practice would facilitate cooperation between European HEIs and recognition of academic qualifications.

Problems

- (a) Signature of the Lisbon Convention would also lead to the automatic recognition of diplomas from *franchising colleges*; some countries, such as Greece, are dubious about this.
- (b) Recognition is not a quantitative concept (number of credit units – number of weeks of a course) but *qualitative*, and this makes it difficult to compare academic qualifications.
- (c) There is another danger inherent in tackling the problem within the *common qualifications framework*: it would drastically limit the autonomy of each HEI to determine the qualifications (knowledge, abilities, vocational opportunities, research training) that they could offer their graduates.

3. The credit unit system

The countries have made progress towards acceptance of the ECTS which, in a more quantitative way but also with some flexibility, lays down the credit units required for each level of study. This is the only sure criterion to allow reliable comparability, a prerequisite for the recognition of academic qualifications. The ECTS also facilitates mobility in practice.

The task

- (a) The ECTS needs even more credibility, since it is not only a matter of the time or duration of a course of study (the number of weeks) but also students' additional obligations (essays, laboratory work, preparation time for exams, etc) which are not always measurable objectively.

Problems

- (a) There must be provision for a general rule in cases where students for various reasons do not acquire the necessary credit units. (Should they repeat the semester? Should they make up the missing credit units? Should they be transferred?)
- (b) In the case of postgraduate degrees it is more difficult to determine credit units, as it depends on the level of requirements in each HEI.

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5. Quality assurance

The key issue of quality assurance (in practice inspection of and corrections to improve the quality of European HEIs by means of *assessment*) has made substantial progress.

The task:

- (a) definition – at national and international level in the EU – of the qualifications framework (and therefore of the educational objectives), to make objective assessment possible;
- (b) participation by foreign assessors;
- (c) participation by students.

Problems

(a) The reduced level of *autonomy* of HEIs in some countries has a marked effect on their assessment (when for example they have no reason to limit the number of entrants and this causes an imbalance in the numbers of students and teachers and when – for lack of resources – there is no assurance of the necessary material and technical infrastructure such as lecture halls, laboratories, etc, and when they do not have sufficient funds for research, postgraduate courses, etc).

(b) Quality assurance /assessment is a very complex and sensitive procedure that presupposes a series of factors and criteria that have been identified but are not yet guaranteed. There is a need for close cooperation, effective coordination and adoption of effective national proposals at various levels (legislation, organisation, staffing, etc.)

CONCLUSION

1. The aim of the Bologna Agreement was, from the outset, the successful creation of a ‘**united**’ and ‘**converged**’ European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Convergence and unity – at whatever level possible – are derived from the concept of the EU itself and are apparent from the specific objectives, such as for example ‘comparable’ and ‘joint’ degrees, ‘overarching or common framework of qualifications in the EHEA’, ‘compatible national frameworks’, ‘standards and guidelines by ENQA’, regulations regarding the ‘curricula’, etc. Political or other understandable reasons for handling the issue perhaps did not allow this convergence to be explicitly stated, but does not prevent it permeating the whole spirit of Bologna.

2. Improving the *quality* of the EHEA – and secondly the *attractiveness* and *competitiveness* which will be derived from it – is precisely the main aim of Bologna. All the other specific objectives serve that aim. If this fundamental aim of the Bologna Agreement is to succeed, what is chiefly required is *improvement* in the quality of (if possible all) the HEIs in the EU. The way to achieve this improvement is thought to be *(re)structuring university courses in three levels* and continual *assessment* (assurance) of quality, as a diagnostic and corrective method of achieving quality. The need for courses to be *comparable* becomes all the more obvious, so that immediate intervention to improve courses is possible. The *European Credit Transfer System* (ECTS) and the *Diploma Supplement* help to achieve comparability and, with all of this, *recognition of academic qualifications* is also possible.

Big and substantial questions (and problems?) remain concerning the extent to which these measures tackle the substantial issue of improving quality and are helpful, or whether they constitute technicalities which do not of themselves ensure quality improvement. For it is well known that a good university depends on the quality of its teaching staff, the level of research, the level and updating of its study courses, its acceptance in the wider academic community, the demand from students, the flow of its graduates into the workplace, etc.

3. The emphasis which is placed – as a ‘guideline’ mostly – on ensuring that graduates will find **professional employment** (and especially in the public sector!) constitutes a strong incentive to attract able students, but care should be taken not to endanger the very existence of the university, which is not a *vocational training school*, but a place to gather and cultivate academic knowledge, and particularly so in a society which aspires to be a ‘Europe of knowledge’ (Bologna Declaration).

4. The emphasis on **mobility** is vastly disproportionate to the actual results of mobility. Experience has shown that one or two semesters spent by a student in one university or another

does nothing to improve the level of their studies, although it does help to enhance the European dimension, which of course is important in itself.

5. What would help most to improve the **quality** of universities, i.e. to achieve the main task, would be:

- (a) increasing the autonomy of HEIs, so that they could increase their competitiveness on the basis of the quality of their study courses,
- (b) boosting research in HEIs with national and European resources (research programmes, doctorates, cooperation by universities in research, joint doctorates, etc.)
- (c) renewal and updating of study courses and making them interdisciplinary,
- (d) maintaining the diversity of universities, to ensure they keep their own personality,
- (e) developing students' potential (particularly through assessment, course content and research).