

The Bologna Process

Introduction

The Bologna Process for the convergence and closer working of European higher education systems is now ten years old, having been initiated in 1999 by just four countries (France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom) following up the Sorbonne Declaration by the same countries, effectively a declaration of intent, of 1997. The Process is a key 'driver' for the achievement of the European Higher Education Area, with wide-ranging implications for the academic community in Europe and its relations with the global academy. Its geographical coverage has grown dramatically, and the Process currently has 46 countries in membership together with a number of 'consultative members', organisations representing different 'constituencies' with an interest in European higher education, including, since 2005, the representatives of teacher trade unionists through the global teachers' union federation Education International (EI).

Structures

The core Bologna structures are

- the **inter-Ministerial conferences** which take place roughly every two years (Bologna, Prague, Berlin, Bergen, London, Leuven/ Louvain-la-Neuve) and which set overall policy through communiqués, the detail of which is both drafted and then implemented by...
- ...the **Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)**, the 'engine room' of the Process, where the national representatives and representatives of the consultative members plan the work programme to meet the objectives set by the ministers: One of the two EI representatives on the BFUG is a UCU official;
- and the **Secretariat**, which remains small compared to the scale of the tasks, and maintains the Bologna website which provides crucial continuity in the context of a rapidly revolving Presidency.

'Bologna' is an inter-governmental process without a major bureaucracy of its own, and it is expected that national authorities bear a major part of the work, together with the consultative member organisations. BFUG members individually or in partnership plan activities and events to contribute to the official work programme and help fulfil the Bologna objectives. So, the Process works in a very different way from the European Union and its institutions and covers many more countries reflecting a much greater diversity. However, the two systems share a range of common policy interests, for example in

respect of the recognition of qualifications and the social and labour market dimensions to higher education: while there are tensions between the two systems, 'Bologna' necessarily works closely with the EU institutions, and the European Commission and Presidency are formally integrated into the working methods of Bologna.

Beginning with the Leuven Inter-ministerial conference in April 2009, the Bologna Process also has a '**Policy Forum**' which will meet after each future inter-ministerial meeting, and be open to interested national governments from countries outside Europe who wish to have a dialogue with the 'Bologna' countries.

Core policy issues

The signature policy of the Bologna Process is the system of year Bachelors (minimum three years study), Masters and Doctors qualifications (three - five). This has met with considerable success in terms of the spread of this pattern across Europe, but the level of consistency of its application and the degree of understanding and acceptance by user groups including students and employers, varies from country to country. The length and nature of Masters degree courses, and access to it from the Bachelor cycle, are particular issues which need to be addressed in the coming years, to reconcile the differing expectations of this level in both academic and labour market terms. Different labour markets have responded differently to the new qualifications, with some welcoming them but others questioning the meaning or the standards of the Bachelors' and Masters' qualifications, or using former qualifications as points of reference. The attitude of the public authorities and professions where the bachelors and masters qualifications have been unfamiliar, has often been critical to their acceptance. There are still issues to be worked out regarding the relationships of the new degrees to existing professional qualifications for example in teaching, accountancy or law. The Process is also looking in greater detail at the Doctoral level, including the status of doctoral students and the initial stage of the research career.

The enhancement of quality assurance has also been given high priority by the Process, as a means of building mutual confidence and transparency between national higher education systems. The Bologna Process has 'seeded' an effective new independent system for recognising and registering quality assurance agencies that meet the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, and which will help to build confidence between national systems.

Since the outset of the Process, increased student and staff mobility and solid measures to sustain and extend access and equity in access to higher education (the so-called 'social dimension') have been avowed objectives of 'Bologna'. The involvement of EI since 2005, working in partnership with the European Students Union (ESU) and other consultative members has ensured that these items are now identified as high priorities but as yet, there has been relatively little tangible progress in these areas which is directly attributable to 'Bologna' actions. The EI / ESU 'Let's Go!' campaign launched in November

200, highlighted the issues of student and staff mobility but also the lack of concrete information particularly on the mobility of academic staff. However, the high profile accorded to the issue ensured that the need for action was recognised. The Leuven communiqué in April 2009 set a specific new target for mobility: 'In 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad.' This is an exceptionally ambitious target and if realised – particularly if on an equitable basis across the countries of the Bologna zone – would have a major impact on the student body throughout the Bologna area. But the achievement of a similar target for staff mobility would be a much harder nut to crack.

Aside from the Bachelor, Master, Doctor structure, and its substantial work in the field of quality assurance, 'Bologna' is sometimes characterised as strong on aspiration and less so on delivery. The communiqué of the most recent inter-ministerial conference indicated that a strong emphasis must now be put on the implementation of the Bologna goals at the national and institutional levels. The EI and ESU have argued strongly in the BFUG for an emphasis on the national and institutional levels to make sure that Bologna is a recognisable reality for staff and students, and that national governments deliver their 'Bologna' commitments. This is a particular issue for the UK, where historically a huge number of foreign students have been 'inwardly mobile', quite independent of the Bologna Process, while home students have been less likely to study abroad than the European norm.

Response to Bologna in the UK

In spite of having been the host to the 2007 Inter-ministerial conference, the UK government and higher education institutions have been relatively complacent about 'Bologna' perhaps reflecting the fact that the UK already has a higher education system structures round Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral qualifications, underpinned by a highly regarded quality assurance system. This is in contrast to the root and branch changes Bologna has required in systems and institutions in most countries of continental Europe. Another reason for this complacency may be that the UK sees itself, with good reason, as a 'global' player in the provision of higher education and research. However, the developments that 'Bologna' will drive through in the 46-country European Higher Education Area, and the relationships it will engender with other global higher education regions, are bound to have an impact on the UK system.

The global impact of Bologna

The speed of development of 'Bologna' and the successes it has achieved in its core activities, has attracted considerable world-wide interest, and attempts by other regions (Australia, the Americas) to develop parallel initiatives mediated by their own circumstances, and to evolve new relationships with the Bologna area. The 'global policy forum' which followed the Leuven inter-ministerial, brought together the Bologna participants and representatives of 16 non-European countries, including the USA, China,

Australia and New Zealand, Mexico, Brazil, Egypt and Japan, who have a developed interest in Bologna. There will be regular such forum meetings attached to Bologna ministerial meetings, and it was agreed that stakeholders, including teachers in higher education, from interested outside countries should also be invited.

The Policy Forum meetings which the Bologna Process has now put in place are likely to push forward the pace and extend the range of global participation and convergence around common principles.