

Bologna Process

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In Brief

The Bologna Process is a set of actions on creation of a common higher education system in Europe – European Higher Education Area, by 2010. This means that, similarly to common EU **market, people, ideas and funds** should be able to **move from one European academic community to another without any obstacles**. The initiative, which was started in 1999, with signing of the Bologna Declaration, involves 46 European countries, and is therefore considered as a historic approach to reshaping European higher education, with structural and geographical scope never seen before. Its objectives are in line with the Lisbon Agenda, set of EU policies aiming for Europe to become the most dynamic and most competitive knowledge-driven economy in the world.

Initiated by politicians – European ministers of education, process is monitored by them at biannual conferences, and together with representatives from major stakeholders in the field (universities, students and employers) in the Bologna Process Follow-up Group. However all its components (but one) are non-compulsory, so it can be said that the process is powered by good will. With its projected deadline just 3 year away, all Bologna Process components have become a reality of academic life across Europe. However, there are strong concerns, coming from different stakeholders, about their **proper implementation** and practical use, and the valid prospects for main goals to be met on time.

Ideas

In the 90s economies and communities around the world started experiencing extensive and rapid changes driven by globalization and information and communication technologies radical development. European politicians felt the need to design and adopt a set of policies which will transform the opportunities of these changes into real-life benefits for European citizens. In 1997 they adopted the Lisbon Agenda, stressing the importance of knowledge, as the driving force for prosperous future for European economy and citizens.

Same principle was a foundation for the Bologna Declaration, which was initially signed by 29 countries, with an idea to ensure the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher

education through extended **quality, flexibility and mobility**. Since globalization is bringing international aspect into every field of human life, international experience in education has become a necessity, and as technological development is changing the position and value of information in every possible activity, new skills and competences are essential for success in global arena.

Central part of the Bologna Process is the establishment of the **European Higher Education Area**, which is basically a process of standardization of European university systems. It includes two sets of measures. First one can be defined as structural changes, and involves well-known system of higher education based on **three cycles** (Bachelor, Master and Doctoral). Second one can be named as **recognition instruments** and involves also very familiar terms – Diploma Supplement, ECTS and Qualifications Framework. Further more, these formal changes should be followed by substantial redesign of study programs, university curricula and education process methodologies to meet the needs of 21st century. This is often described as learner-centered, learning-outcomes-oriented education. Finally, Bologna Process puts strong emphasis on Quality Assurance at all levels and through all stages of higher education process.

Bologna Process embraces several other concepts which are in the line with its main goals and should bring added value to European Higher Education Area development. First one is **Lifelong learning**, a set of measures and policies which will extend education process outside of university timeframe according to the needs of new age and put higher education in context of continuous and flexible learning paths. Two others are **European dimension** and **social dimension** of higher education, which can be explained as final and distinctive touch to European Higher Education Area establishment, incorporating European values and European social model into European higher education and thus raising its quality, social inclusiveness and external attractiveness. At the end, Bologna Process strives for synergy between European higher education and European research area, especially at the doctoral level of studies.

Reality

Bringing ideas into real-life environment is always difficult; in case of the Bologna Process it was particularly challenging due to several reasons. It took some time before academic staff became honestly engaged in the process which was seen by many as imposed ‘from above’ by politicians and introducing quick, ‘revolutionary’ changes into systems based on centuries-long self-driven evolution. It was challenging to catch the interest of employers for the matter, and even

further for other stakeholders, people in general and their representatives to see the Bologna Process as a social rather than just academic issue. Finally, and maybe most importantly, there was, and still is an evident **lack of students involvement** in the process which ironically gives them central role in the reformed higher education process.

But before all above mentioned, Bologna Process requires a lot of time, energy and money, resources which are always reluctantly spent, by both people and governments. This is why in reality, structural changes are rarely followed by substitution ones.

Bologna Process aims at a system of easily readable and comparable degrees by adoption of a **system essentially based on three cycles** of studies. While this is a common situation at almost all European universities nowadays, it was often accomplished by squeezing and stretching old curricula into new formats, instead of genuine rethinking of courses (or modules, as they are now called) and study programs in partnership with students and particularly businesses. In this, as in many cases, universities took a formalistic rather than proactive approach in implementing new system.

When it comes to recognition instruments, they are designed to assist **free and fair academic mobility** within European Higher Education Area. Diploma Supplement should be awarded to all graduate students automatically, free of charge and in a universal format, so it can function as standardized and comprehensive description of academic experience of a degree-holder. It is inexplicably seldom used, maybe because it has been understood as just another piece of paper or bureaucracy, and therefore left to be dealt with in final years of the process. However it is essential tool for describing learning outcomes, particularly for efficient transfer from academic into professional arena.

ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) should be fair and transparent **measurement of student workload** – time and energy invested by student in passing a module. In well-known reality for a good number of European students, ECTS credits are unintentionally or deliberately misused and usually reflect module's portion in lecture hours or similar references, with little or no contribution of students in their determination. ECTS is thus failing to be the main promoter of flexibility and mobility within European Higher Education Area.

Qualifications Framework is designed to be an **indicator of the level of skills** and competences acquired through higher education but also through prior learning and training (including non-formal and informal learning). Therefore it is a system of comparable education levels broader than Bologna Process three cycles system. While European Qualification Framework has been

introduced, it has been implemented at national levels at very slow pace, often failing to serve as instrument and promoter for transparency, mobility and employability.

Finally there is little or no progress in development of actual policies and actions from the concepts of Lifelong Learning and European and social dimension of higher education.

Prospects

It seems obvious that Bologna Process won't fully reach its objectives by 2010. It has been acknowledged by ministers themselves, at the last biannual conference, that existing system measuring progress in implementing the Bologna Process (Bologna stocktaking) should be examined. On the other hand, a lot of things were done, and strong footstones for further actions have been set.

Major changes were made in a way people think about education – there is an evident shift to learner-centered and learning outcomes-oriented education which is putting focus on equipping students with skills and knowledge necessary for contemporary labor market. Further more, for many academic communities in Europe there was a huge increase in quality culture – students are particularly taking newly adopted culture of permanent quality assurance and continuous development to professional environment.

Formal structural framework, although lacking more essence, opens more opportunities for initiatives calling for substantial changes in higher education, favorably coming from students, in partnership with other stakeholders, and resulting in more quality, mobility and flexibility.

Further Reading:

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

www.aegee-nis.org.yu/bpbp

Further Conversation :-)

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