

Bologna Process, a Brief Overview

By Dragan Stojanovski, AEGEE Niš

I Attractiveness and competitiveness through mobility and flexibility

“Continuous reform and innovation is already a reality - and the only serious option - at many universities, and ... many factors are combining to affect the nature and success of these complex processes. If reforms are to be successful, there needs to be a much greater awareness throughout society that this current period represents a major cultural shift which is transforming long-accepted notions of higher education and that implementing the reforms in a sustainable way needs time and support”.¹

Global economy is knowledge driven economy, demanding continuous change and development. Economies must adapt to rapid technological, organizational and indeed conceptual changes in doing business in order to benefit from this new economy. Labor force has the same objective – and in order to do that has to show more flexibility in highly competitive environment. With trade barriers falling down, developing and transition countries can seize the momentum to achieve a significant development catch-up. To do that, they need to ensure effective institutions, trade openness, together with macroeconomic stability, and climate of competition with equal opportunities for all. It is obvious that governments and businesses have to work closely together on reaching these goals and that the education is the key field of this cooperation.² Educating people for entering global economy job market means to provide them with capabilities of fast analysis, synthesis and application of knowledge, innovative thinking, efficient teamwork and adapting to new working methods. Without many exceptions, this calls for an educational reform.

The Bologna Declaration acknowledges that “a Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognized as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space”³. It affirms the commitment for the European Area of Higher education, built on “intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent”⁴, to be established by 2010 with the final goal of Europe becoming “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”⁵. Six action lines were introduced in the Bologna Declaration:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles
- Establishment of a system of credits
- Promotion of mobility
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance
- Promotion of the European dimension in higher education.

Three more were introduced in the Prague Communiqué⁶:

- Lifelong learning
- Higher education institutions and students
- Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area.

Another action line was introduced in the Berlin Communiqué⁷:

- Doctoral studies and the synergy between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

In the follow-up after Prague and Berlin ministerial summits, the social dimension of higher education has been seen as an interconnecting action line. At the Bergen summit following priorities were also declared:

- Implementation of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance

¹ EUA Trends IV, April 2005

² See: G8 Moscow Declaration, June 2006

³ Bologna Declaration, June 1999

⁴ Sorbonne Joint Declaration, May 1998

⁵ Lisbon Strategy, March 2000

⁶ See: Prague Communiqué, May 2001

⁷ See: Berlin Communiqué, September 2003

- Implementation of the national frameworks for qualifications
- The awarding and recognition of joint degrees, including at the doctorate level
- Creating opportunities for flexible learning paths in higher education, including procedures for the recognition of prior learning⁸.

Common aims have been followed and targets are being met by the great majority of 45 countries involved in the process⁹. “There is good news for higher education institutions, who are working hard to implement the Bologna actions, and who can now see their achievements made visible. There is good news for students, because the Bologna Process is creating a better and more open world of learning, with enhanced mobility, transparency, transfer and recognition of qualifications”¹⁰. Further more, very often reforms shaped by the Bologna Process objectives are used as an opportunity to deal with other problems which have long been known to exist. However, with the Bologna Process being only the framework for reforms, with only the Lisbon Convention¹¹ bringing formal obligations, different situations can be found across Europe when it comes to its implementation. Because economic conditions vary greatly from country to country, as well as the education traditions and starting points in the process implementation, “when looking more closely at how practices are, it becomes apparent that there are still many challenges left”¹².

Implementation can often be slowed down by lack of the necessary institutional autonomy to make key decisions or the additional financial resources for universities to deal with the reform. “The process of moving towards a comprehensible three-cycle system throughout Europe is a highly complex cultural and social transformation that has set off a chain of developments with their own dynamics in different contexts. Structural change must be matched with proper redevelopment of the curricula, and often this has not been completed. Confusion sometimes exists regarding the objectives of the first cycle degree (which many mistakenly regard as a compressed version of former long-cycle programs) and in many cases there has not been adequate time for institutions and academics to address reforms in a comprehensive way and to benefit from the opportunities offered through restructuring the curricula”¹³. There is a need to do more to ensure a systematic use of the commonly agreed Bologna transparency tools, in particular ECTS (Incorrect or superficial use of ECTS is currently still widespread. Such usage hinders the re-structuring of curricula, and the development of flexible learning paths for students, while also making both mobility and recognition more difficult¹⁴), as a central feature of curriculum design and the Diploma Supplement as well as the challenge of providing clear information about learning outcomes. “The necessary focus upon restructuring curricula and the challenges of designing new study programs and putting in place additional counseling and support for more flexible learner-centered teaching have meant that [faculty members] have less time than before to devote to their research activities”¹⁵ (having in mind an affirmed importance of linking the higher education and research agendas). There are problems with the recognition of non-formal learning as an equal element in higher education programs. “The development of national and European frameworks for qualifications may be an opportunity to further embed lifelong learning in higher education”¹⁶.

Bergen Communiqué acknowledges that “time is needed to optimize the impact of structural change on curricula and thus to ensure the introduction of the innovative teaching and learning processes that Europe needs”¹⁷. Special emphasis is put on “a need for greater sharing of expertise to build capacity at both institutional and governmental level”¹⁸. It also calls for the cooperative work with the organizations representing business and the social partners in reaching the goals of the Bologna Process: “there is a need for greater dialogue, involving governments, institutions and social partners”¹⁹. The need for improved dialogue between stakeholders in tackling the Bologna Process implementation challenges is also recognized by the European University Association indicating that “more public debate on the reforms is needed”²⁰ and that “one of the paradoxes of the Bologna Process reforms is that while their goal is to

⁸ See: Bergen Communiqué, May 2005

⁹ Serbia joined the Bologna Process in September 2003

¹⁰ BFC Bologna Process Stocktaking, May 2005

¹¹ Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, April 1997

¹² ESIB Bologna with Student Eyes, May 2005; See also: ESIB The Black Book of the Bologna Process, May 2005, UFD The Bologna Process from a Norwegian Perspective, October 2004

¹³ EUA Trends IV, April 2005

¹⁴ EUA Trends V, April 2007

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ BFC From Berlin to Bergen, May 2005

¹⁷ Bergen Communiqué, May 2005

¹⁸ ibid

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ EUA Trends IV, April 2005

respond to societal concerns, there has been until now insufficient dialogue with society. Thus universities and government, while continuing to improve understanding and better usage of the different tools, need to re-engage with the overall purposes of the reform in order to ensure that a stronger student focus, employability, mobility, attractiveness and social inclusion are firmly embedded as characteristics of the emerging EHEA²¹. The European Association for Quality Assurance is calling for “the exchange of viewpoints and experiences amongst key stakeholders (including higher education institutions, students and labor market representatives)”²² to be enhanced, while the Novi Sad Initiative advocates that “governments, higher education institutions, students and other stakeholders throughout Europe should work together in partnership based upon mutual trust and confidence.”²³ EUA says “that one of the main challenges for the future is to strengthen dialogue with employers and other external stakeholders. For many institutions this requires a change in culture that will take time.”²⁴

II Three more years, and then what?

“Europe’s universities have, since their foundation over 800 years ago, championed enquiry, fostered a civilized and tolerant society and prepared young people for their role in society and the economy. Europe now expects its universities to perform an even wider role, enabling civil society to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Climate change, energy issues, increasing longevity, the rapid pace of technological change, growing global interdependence and rising economic inequality both within Europe and between Europe and other continents: all these require investigation, fundamental research as well as technological and social innovation which will solve problems as they arise and ensure economic success combined with social stability in many different societies.”²⁵

With structural changes within the Bologna Process framework being largely accomplished and their results being benchmarked, there is an evident shift towards research, social and external dimension of the European higher education. This is followed by a series of efforts to extend the reform with major institutional reforms needed to ensure the fulfillment of the high objectives of the EHEA creation – European economic competitiveness together with the European universities competitiveness on the global education market. Special emphasis is put on strengthening academic autonomy for universities to be able to efficiently run education and research processes, reshaping funding to be more market oriented and relied on business-academia partnerships and development of policies of differentiation and integration for universities to better function and cooperate to ensure the scientific excellence and for education systems to facilitate the specific demands of the economies and challenges facing different regions. “The focus has shifted from governmental actions, including legislation, to implementation of reforms within institutions, with broad support for the underlying idea of more student-centered and problem based learning.”²⁶

Moving away from recommendations for formal to concept of substantial changes in higher education development will bring better results, but will also take more time and energy, as complex challenges are being tackled. Implementing national qualifications framework in compliance with the European Qualifications Framework will be the key objective for 2010. With structural reforms failing to show expected outcomes, it is acknowledged that mobility, the key ingredient of the EHEA, is closely connected with the social dimension of higher education. In the same way, strong focus on the internationalization of the “Bologna trademark” has once again brought forward the area of the European dimension of higher education. Quality assurance and enhancement in “preparing the student for the labor market, for further competence building and for active citizenship”²⁷ will also continue to stand high on the agenda just as a need for an extensive social dialogue on the issues of the education reform.

²¹ EUA The Lisbon Declaration; Europe’s Universities beyond 2010: Diversity with a Common Purpose, April 2007

²² ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, February 2005; See also: CNE Livre des références, January 2006

²³ The Novi Sad Initiative Final Document, October 2005

²⁴ EUA Trends V, April 2007

²⁵ EUA The Lisbon Declaration; Europe’s Universities beyond 2010: Diversity with a Common Purpose, April 2007

²⁶ EUA Trends V, April 2007

²⁷ Bergen Communiqué, May 2005

III A Place for Us

Possibility of AEGEE's request to join BFUG was presented at the Bologna Board Meeting in Vienna, on June 13, 2006:

"The Secretariat (Ann McVie) advised that the paper was to make the Board aware of a possible approach from AEGEE to become a member of BFUG. This had arisen through informal contact made at the Holy See seminar. AEGEE had worked informally with BFUG in the past and was looking to re-establish contact and increase their involvement with the Process. ESIB had been alerted to this."²⁸

The Bologna Process is a historic approach to rethinking of the European, and wider perception of the higher education, with geographical and structural scope never seen before. Present situation, which gives ESIB the role of exclusive voice of students in the Bologna Process, is, like every monopolistic approach, incorrect and ineffective – failing to reach the grass-roots level and equip students to actively participate in reform processes. With a widespread long-lasting network of competent student activists and a unique multidisciplinary program orientation, AEGEE is more than competent to be engaged in "the endeavor to create a European area of higher education, where national identities and common interests can interact and strengthen each other for the benefit of Europe, of its students, and more generally of its citizens"²⁹.

There are two ways of getting involved. The first one is a formal one – seeking a BFUG partnership, which would include a very strict procedure³⁰. The second one is the results oriented work on both local and European level – doing what we do best, and what has already been acknowledged in two current national reports on the Bologna Process (Georgia and Greece).

IV Useful Links

Bologna Secretariat, Benelux

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

Bologna Secretariat, London

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bologna/>

Bologna Secretariat, Bergen

<http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/>

EUA <http://www.eua.be/>

ESIB <http://www.esib.org/>

CoE <http://www.coe.int/>

EI <http://www.ei-ie.org/>

EURASHE <http://www.eurashe.be/>

ENQA <http://www.enqa.eu/>

UNICE <http://www.unice.org/>

UNESCO-CEPES <http://www.cepes.ro/>

DG Education and Culture

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/education_culture/index_en.htm

Lisbon Strategy - Education and Training 2010

http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/et_2010_en.html

²⁸ BFUGB12 minutes, 13 June 2006

²⁹ Sorbonne Joint Declaration, May 1998

³⁰ See: Criteria for new Consultative Members and BFUG Partners, March 2005