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## **Unlocking Europe's Potential – Contributing to a better world Ghent, 19-20 May 2008**

### **The Bologna Process – reflections from the international HEI perspective.**

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#### **Introduction**

When preparing for this presentation, a brief comment on how the world perceives the Bologna process (BP) and what it might be expecting from it in the future, I first wanted to take, as my exclusive starting point, the European discussion of the External Dimension of the Bologna Process; a perspective that seemed appropriate for someone who comes from an international association, the IAU, and in line with what the organisers had asked me to do. But as was so well shown by Pavel Zgaga in his book on the External Dimension of Bologna<sup>1</sup>, this is not a simple matter. Even examining the impact or influence of the Bologna process beyond its ever expanding borders, actually requires that we begin from the European perspective and by looking at the process in a holistic manner.

I also decided to offer a major disclaimer. The complexity, speed of change and the diverse and multiple ways in which the Bologna Process is being implemented, can only be fully understood and known to those deeply involved in its design, planning and implementation – thus all of you. Quite honestly, as an observer on the margin, I can only contribute to this knowledge and appreciation in a very modest way. Furthermore, the ways in which the Bologna Process is viewed from the outside is also rather varied and diverse. Therefore, my comments are necessarily partial and by no means exhaustive.

I decided to settle on five questions and to use these as a way to structure my comments and remarks:

1. What is known about the Bologna Process in the world of Higher Education (HE) beyond Europe? Or more importantly how is it perceived?
2. What makes the Bologna Process a unique model of reform and to what extent is it applicable only in Europe?
3. If viewed as a 'brand' or a 'trademark, what is the Bologna Process marketing or exporting, and to whom?
4. Is the Bologna Process only a phase in the construction of a global higher education area?
5. What benefits, challenges and risks may the Bologna Process bring to higher education worldwide?

#### **1. The Bologna Process viewed and perceived from the outside**

There are a number of points on which there is absolutely no doubt with regard to the Bologna Process. Though the preoccupation with how well it is known or how it is perceived

by non participants is relatively recent, it has been, as Peter Scott has phrased it: an ‘inside-outside’ process<sup>2</sup> from the start. Its genesis was driven both by internal pressures for reform and change but it also responded to a more global set of imperatives which can in a simplistic way be summed up as ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ or the push to make the HE systems and institutions in Europe perform better and be more attractive to others (outside of Europe).

A second point on which there is general agreement is that the Process has and continues to attract unprecedented attention worldwide. Thus at least in part, it is already accomplishing its goal – making European HE highly attractive to others. The IAU 2005 Global survey on internationalization confirmed that Europe has displaced all other parts of the world as the top geographical priority for the internationalization strategies for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), next only to their interest in their own region<sup>3</sup>. As we prepare for our 3<sup>rd</sup> global survey, I believe this trend will be confirmed.

There is, however, a fair distance between attracting curiosity and attention on the part of other countries and regions, which Bologna has done and a sound knowledge of what the Bologna Process entails. Knowledge of the process outside of Europe remains still highly uneven. Most renowned aspects – the major lines of structural reform to a 3 cycle system; a move to a European wide quality assurance system, the counting of credits through the ECTS and the elaboration of a common qualifications framework are probably known to most interested in higher education. But much of the substance below these main lines of the process remains somewhat hidden or ignored. I would argue that to the extent this is the case, much of the innovation that the Bologna Process represents, and thus much of its potential to profoundly change higher education outside of Europe as well may be lost.

At the same time, the Bologna Process, and its achievements are viewed in a very positive light outside of Europe, indeed more so than inside Europe. Policy makers and HEI leaders alike and all over the world can only admire the scale, scope and momentum that the Process has achieved in merely a decade. In fact, it seems that the only critics of the process are to be found in Europe.

Inside Europe, there are those who are quite sceptical about the progress being made and critical of its impact in Europe. They point to the distance still to cover to reach the initial goals and to the new difficulties that uneven and diverse implementation on the ground have brought about. Some argue that instead of improving the transparency of the European Higher Education Area, Bologna has increased diversity, others point out how mobility has been made more complex and difficult because of Bologna’s new degree cycles. Yet others underline the difficulties of aligning calendars, let alone adopting a common pedagogical approach of student-centred learning.

In other parts of the world, and especially from a political perspective, though, the Bologna Process is seen as having achieved the practically unimaginable. It is viewed as an unprecedented and unparalleled agreement among some 46 countries on a common and multidimensional vision for HE and a detailed, incremental strategy to achieve it.

As has been recognized in the London Ministerial, much more needs to be done to make the Bologna Process better known, I would stress that what must be highlighted are those aspects of the Process that, while less visible from the outside, are its major innovation.

Let me underline a few of the features of the process that would benefit from being better known because they are unique.

On the **political level** what should be more emphasised is the following:

- The process has been voluntary, at the state level, ie. governments vie to sign up;

- It is incremental, continuously adding building blocks in a highly pragmatic manner;
- The multi-stakeholder nature of the approach, involving the organizations representing faculty members and staff, association of institutions, policy makers and relevant international organizations, has allowed a combination of top a down and bottom up process of agenda setting;
- Strong and active involvement of students;

(The last two aspects, most particularly, should be seen as the key to guarantee a continuous and successful balancing between the push and pull of State and the Market, between concerns about public responsibility and levels or expectations about private contribution, between the economic competitiveness and the social cohesion agendas.)

- The relatively loose infrastructure which nevertheless sustains forward movement;
- The distinct but undeniably critical role of the EU and the Commission as a powerful tool to facilitate progress, while not driving it.

What needs to be highlighted as unique at the **academic level** includes:

- the fact that the process is more than a new academic architecture of degree cycles or the structural changes being made;
- the pedagogical/cognitive impact on learning, the fundamental change being brought about in terms of focus on learning outcomes with the Tuning projects and placing the student as the centre of attention;
- how the ECTS credit system differs quite fundamentally from other credit systems used elsewhere – as analysts in the US have pointed out - moving beyond the counting of contact hours to assessing the overall learning effort.<sup>4,5</sup>

There are probably many other aspects that escape me but in summary, I would like to stress that care must be exercised to ensure that the Bologna Process is fully understood and that it is viewed as a sort of ‘package deal’ with a certain internal integrity and coherence that is needed to effect the changes successfully at all levels: at programme, institutional, national and regional levels.

## **2. What makes the Bologna Process a unique model of reform and to what extent is it applicable only in Europe?**

In part I have already touched upon some of the unique features but here allow me, for the sake of clarity, to distinguish between the Bologna Process as a regional reform process built on multilateral and collective actions on the one hand and Bologna-style reforms that can actually be adopted at the national or institutional level without reference to any regional movement.

As a regional reform process, it is a unique model of systemic integration that one could argue has not been achieved anywhere else, even in some federal nations such as Canada or the US where higher education remain highly state or province bound. It has been possible for many reasons tied to history, geopolitics and the pervasive nature of globalisation. The Bologna Process actually rests on or is rooted in many building blocks. These include not only documents such as the Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988, as pointed out in Pavel Zgaga’s book, but also on a whole series of initiatives launched in the mid 1980s when the first study tours and mobility programmes were funded by the European Economic Community, allowing and encouraging higher education actors at various levels to get to know each other. Since that time, these foundations have turned into a whole infrastructure or web of ways for

academics, administrators and students to link up at all levels of the Higher education system in Europe.

Fuelled by the mobility programmes, shepherded by networks of centres such as the ENIC /NARICs, framed by legislative instruments such as Directives and Conventions and helped by practical tools such as the ECTS and Diploma Supplement – all pre-dating the meetings in Paris and Bologna, the Process took off using an infrastructure to which the renewed political will of several Ministers gave new life. Without this infrastructure, just as without the political will, the Ministers would not have been able to move as consensually, nor have gained so much multi-stakeholder support for making swift progress.

At the moment, there is no region in the world that has such an infrastructure in place, the resources at its disposal to underpin the movement and the economic stability or the political will to create such a higher education space, though there are many signs that this is changing.

In this regard, the Bologna process is acting as a powerful catalyst for national as well as regional reflection on reforms and is spurring initiatives and similar processes in many parts of the world. Many of these are encouraged and aided by former colonial or current geopolitical interests and different European countries take the lead in helping things along. There is the Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education and Research Area, the Lusophone Area of Higher Education, the Tuning project in Latin America (ALFA). Elsewhere, for example in Asia, Australia has looked at the Bologna Process in part to reconsider its role in Asia, and given its dependence on international students, to consider how to counter-balance the impact the Bologna process may have on student flows. In the USA, the Bologna Process is attracting increasing interest and pilot projects to test the feasibility of some aspects of its implementation are getting underway.

A very stark example of the influence of the Bologna process is offered by the Union Economique et Monetaire de l'Ouest Africain (UEMOA). When reading the directives adopted by ministers of higher education in May 2007 by the Union, both the substance – adoption of 3 level structures, introduction of easily transferred credits etc., and the rationale used to justify them – overcoming poor readability/transparency, better comparisons and more portability of qualifications, are highly similar to those of the Bologna Process.<sup>6</sup>

These few examples show how the Bologna Process is being used as a model for structuring higher education collaboration and reform efforts at regional level. Again to quote the IAU internationalization study, one's own region is the most important geographic priority for internationalization efforts in almost all parts of the world (North America being the only exception). So there is great potential for the emergence of a Cotonou Process, a Catana Process or to see other exotic locations lend their name to reform efforts on the global higher education landscape.

A word of caution though; I would argue that contrary to technological change which allows for leapfrogging, higher education reform on a regional level, is a fairly linear process of incremental change requiring time for cultural adjustment and ownership to happen. Each world region has its unique features and obstacles as well as reasons for moving or not moving forward. As one of the observers of the Bologna Process in Algeria recently wrote: 'Bologna aimed at creating a EHEA to increase the employability and mobility of the citizens, yet the adoption by the Maghreb countries and more especially Algeria of its organisational pattern was decreed with no real link with the basic substratum of a regional labour market that justified a degree market that gave meaning to the mobility of skills which is one of the aims of the reform'<sup>7</sup>.

At the national level, the Bologna Process is also having a strong impact. The model of reform being implemented in several and indeed a growing number of countries outside of Europe explicitly uses the Bologna Process as an example and affirms a desire to align its reforms on those of the Bologna Process. In this way, it is not so much the Bologna Process as a multilateral movement that is stimulating change, but it is being used by national legislators as a catalyst for justifying and shaping reforms as well.

Thus the Bologna Process is not only about changing the law and drawing new lines in the sand. It is a negotiated process of pedagogical, as well as structural changes which needs buy-in and requires a rather major shift of focus towards the student, and what he or she learns as a key measure of quality and accountability. So whether applicable only in Europe or not, it is certainly acting as a catalyst everywhere to re-think and review many aspects of higher education and Europeans will be called upon even more than now to share their experience with the wider community.

### **3. If viewed as a ‘brand’ or a ‘trademark, what is the Bologna Process marketing or exporting, and to whom?**

It is hard to pinpoint the time at which the notion of the Bologna Process as a brand entered into the discourse for the first time. Certainly, it is now part of the External Dimension discussion but, in keeping with Peter Scott’s inside-outside concept, we can argue that it was always there more or less. Bologna was about making European higher education more attractive, more competitive – also vis a vis the world outside Europe. Branding and trademarks are certainly linked to competition and promotion. But is this what is best to adopt in the External Dimension?

Prof. Brenda Gourley, Vice Chancellor of Open University, UK and IAU Board Member discussed the Bologna Process as a brand in 2003 during EUA’s Graz Convention<sup>8</sup>. Branding, according to Vice Chancellor Gourley, needed to focus several aspects of the higher education institutional environment that was being built in Europe. Let me paraphrase her 7 features that a Bologna-style brand of HEI would need to have:

- i. a certain assurance or guarantee of quality being offered;
- ii. the rule of democratic principles and related governance structures;
- iii. an environment of pluralism, multi-culturality, multilingualism and diversity where achievements were documented, recognized and transportable;
- iv. a context which offered staff mobility and technology facilitated access to staff from elsewhere for learners;
- v. teaching and research opportunities better than those offered elsewhere;
- vi. improved consideration of the social dimension of students’ needs”, including their employability needs and finally;
- vii. embracing the notion of higher education as a public good as well and as a public responsibility – and accepting the social responsibilities that flow from such a proposition.

These seven features focus on the outcomes at the institutional level of the Bologna Process.

If we widen the focus to stamp the Bologna ‘brand’ on a set of principles and activities linked to the process itself, I would add 3 others which seem essential to promote alongside the others so that the Process can be shared effectively with other jurisdictions:

- viii. a reform process which is based on stakeholder dialogue for its design and implementation

- ix. a process which values partnerships and cooperation and seeks to promote these despite the pressure for competition.
- x. a process which balances using higher education and research to reach the goal of greater global competitiveness with its commitment to using this sector for achieving social cohesion and indeed global solidarity inside and outside its parameters.

As demonstrated through marketing campaigns, the concept of corporate social responsibility has tremendous appeal. It is essential that the marketing campaigns being developed and those still to come within the Bologna Process are used to promote and attract support for the fundamental academic values which are an essential feature and lasting legacy of European higher education. Europe has a tremendous opportunity as well as a responsibility to use its current fame, not in a mercantile manner but through collaboration and sharing.

#### **4. Is the Bologna Process a phase in the growth of a global higher education space?**

Before commenting on this perhaps most overarching and important question for us non-Europeans, it may be useful to consider as well, the interplay between the general trend of globalization and its impact on higher education on the one hand and the Bologna Process on the other hand. How do these two on-going processes interact and how do they impact on each other? Clearly the focus on the External Dimension signals the recognition that it is impossible and unwise to isolate Europe from the rest of the world and that European higher education is also an actor on the global scene. The success and continuous enlargement of the Bologna Process in terms of geography and contents could almost be viewed as a steered, structured and rather orderly response to globalization and a kind of banding together to counter the negative impacts of globalization through collective action.

It has been argued that globalization, aided by ICTs, has already created a global market place for the best and the brightest, students and faculty alike, for resources especially research funding, for flow of ideas and knowledge sharing. Yet, this global space, being created by globalization, relies exclusively on market forces and has no safeguards, has as few controls and as much flexibility as possible. Thus it also results in ever-greater gaps between those who have and those who do not have access to knowledge and scientific infrastructure.

The philosophy that underpins Bologna and Bologna's 'brand' of construction of a new – regional space is starkly different. It is orchestrated. It builds-in safeguards, it allows for intervention and it imposes controls.

It is not surprising, that just as in the push for ever freer trade with as small a role for the State as possible, with regard to the Bologna Process, American observers also express both admiration and caution as well. To quote David Ward of the American Council on Education, 'it is critical to avoid that the process becomes a new European level of regulation and standardization [which would lead to a situation in which the] promise of improved flexibility, innovation and collaboration will be lost'<sup>9</sup>.

Most would agree that unnecessary bureaucracy is to be avoided, but it is a question of degree/level and how much state intervention acceptable for the greater good varies a lot.

The construction of a global higher education space is about more than geographic coverage. The issue is about the nature of the building process and the kind of the edifice that will be designed. Once again, the Bologna Process offers an opportunity and carries a responsibility in this respect – as the largest organized group of countries, it sets the agenda and may thus set it for much of the global space as well. A clear example of this is the creation of the European Quality Assurance Register, which has the potential to become the standard against which Quality Assurance agencies will be assessed globally in the future. It will be

interesting to see how many and how quickly foreign agencies will wish to be registered in the EAQR. The same can be said about the European Qualifications Framework which is already being used as a model by countries that never had one. The influence being exerted by Europe and by its regional and incremental process of building a Higher Education Area has increased tremendously in the past decade and will, in my view, continue to grow and spread.

##### **5. What benefits, challenges and risks may the Bologna Process bring to higher education worldwide?**

The Bologna Process has been an incredibly exciting and positive process overall. It has re-energized and re-positioned higher education, and not just European HE, in decision-makers' minds. It has brought change, dialogue and real achievements. It is not up to me to point out the benefits that it brings to European higher education; as actors in the Bologna Process you know them better than I. Of course, the Process is not without some risk, both inside Europe and beyond. Since this seminar is about looking at the future, it is more important to note the challenges and risks; the benefits are quickly absorbed and appreciated.

So let me just briefly point to a few challenges, and also some of the benefits that might be less apparent.

- As in the overall process of internationalization, the risk of linguistic homogeneity or wholesale adoption of English as the language of higher education is growing – according to the Academic Cooperation Association the increase in number of programs taught in English has been quite important: from 700 offered in 2002 to 2 400 programmes in 2006/7.<sup>10</sup> It seems that in terms of attractiveness it is already having an impact on student mobility from outside of Europe – on the positive side, but I cannot but deplore the potential loss of linguistic and cultural wealth that may result from this trend.
- The concerted push to become a more attractive destination for students from outside of Europe, will need to be accompanied by a real effort to improve the quality of student services offered in Europe – starting with accommodation but also counselling and others kinds of pastoral services. A challenge that will turn into a benefit for the students.
- Branding and marketing may quickly turn into major recruitment campaigns, especially for differential fee paying students, thus simply heating up what is already a fairly cut-throat race for the best and the brightest. It may also drive up tuition fees ever higher and increase the already devastating consequences of the brain drain.
- As indicated in Trends V, competition within Europe and beyond is seen as a future challenge. Balancing collaboration and partnerships with competition, especially in the context of raising revenue from fee-paying students, may prove increasingly difficult. It is here that the value of institutional diversity needs to be used in the EHEA to its fullest advantage.
- Given the strength of the economic competitiveness agenda and the lack of dedicated resources for the Bologna Process, there is a risk that some of the values that underpin and are articulated in the Bologna Process declarations fall by the wayside. If the brand of Bologna is exported, it should not be a lopsided one - the economic, social and cultural agendas need to be fully integrated.
- The need to focus so much attention on the reforms being introduced, it is a challenge for some European HEIs to remain open to developments elsewhere; there is a risk of becoming cut off, not being open to innovation that may be taking place elsewhere, paying less attention to the global social responsibility that goes beyond even the less developed regions of Europe to other world regions.

- Governments, noting the success of the Bologna Process may be tempted to continue and expand their steering role, adopting an interpretation of institutional autonomy that serves the State more than it liberates the energies of the HEIs. Other governments may adopt the Ministerial and legislative part of Bologna and ignore the multi-stakeholder contribution.

But to end on a positive note, it must also be noted that without the Bologna Process, the stakeholder groups would probably not be as well organized, as strong and as committed to collective action as they have become. This is a huge benefit of the Bologna Process that too should be exported beyond Europe, especially since these groups are essential partners in the design and implementation of the reform processes.

## **Conclusion**

Plans are now underway at UNESCO to organize the World Conference on Higher Education +10. According to the information available, the focus of this conference will be on what has changed in the world of higher education in the past decade and how these new trends will evolve in the future. The Bologna Process, which after all impacts directly on some 4,000 university-level HEIs out of a world total of almost 14,000, thus almost a quarter of the world's university level institutions<sup>11</sup> is one of the most important developments. In a sense, the second hugely influential development since 1998 has been the growth in prominence and attention that have gained all kinds of national and international rankings and ratings of institutions and programs around the world.

These two processes could be seen as opposite sides of a continuum with on the one hand the Bologna Process offering a negotiated, structured, and systematic process of reform and change and on the other hand the numerous rankings and ratings offering the rather volatile and often fickle and at least seemingly uncontrollable process of naming and shaming, played out in the media. Both are leading to changes at the level of individual higher education institutions and system policies.

Both will be discussed in front of a large and also highly diverse higher education audience at the IAU 13<sup>th</sup> General Conference which will take place at Utrecht University in July, 2008.

In conclusion, let me recall that the title for this seminar is 'Unlocking Europe's potential: contributing to a better world'. How to do this?

Clearly, the Bologna Process – its principles, goals and action lines offers a strategy to improve and strengthen higher education. Once again, I would argue that all the actors of the Bologna Process, including the individual HEIs have a responsibility, an opportunity and even self-interest to promote the reforms that safeguard what is most valuable and universal in higher education, the core values, such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, alongside with the responsibility to respond to the needs of society, to seek to offer the best learning and research opportunities while promoting justice, freedom, respect for human rights, human dignity and solidarity. As they are called upon and continue to develop activities within and beyond the large Europe of the Bologna Process, its participants must continue to do so, on the basis of partnership and mutual learning with their counterparts and remain an open community rather than a closed club.

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