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## **The Bologna Process – A Historical Review**

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### **1. Introduction: A Brief History of the Bologna Process**

In June 1998, the Ministers for Education of Germany, Italy, France and the United Kingdom met at Sorbonne University in Paris and published a surprising document after their meeting. In this document the four Ministers committed to create a common framework for a future European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The framework was intended to bring about a harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system (note the use of the singular here!) in order to promote and ease mobility of students, graduates, and teaching staff (Sorbonne Declaration 1998).

Some smaller EU member states complained that the “big four” were once again trying to drive a reform agenda without consulting the others. So negotiations began with all EU member states and one year later, in 1999, the Bologna Declaration was issued and signed by Ministers from 29 European countries. These were already more countries than EU member states and in the following years more and more countries joined by signing the Declaration and committing to its reform goals. The aim of the Declaration was to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in which students and graduates could move freely between countries and universities and have their study achievements recognised in all signatory countries. The Bologna Declaration proposed the “adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees” and the “adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate” with access to the second cycle after a minimum of three years of study which was also supposed to be relevant to the European labour market (Bologna Declaration 1999). The Ministers also agreed to introduce a credit point system for study achievements, cooperate in quality assurance of higher education and promote the European dimension in higher education. This reform agenda was supposed to be implemented by 2010 and from

2010 onwards the term “Bologna Process” was replaced in official documents by the term “European Higher Education Area (EHEA)”, although implementation varied among signatory countries and the reform agenda had not yet been fully achieved.

In a comparison of the EHEA with the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations consisting of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, Lao, Cambodia) higher education cooperation, also a regional harmonisation process in Southeast Asian higher education to support and increase student mobility, Dang (2018: 401) observed a behaviour of some countries (especially the smaller and peripheral ones in the region) which he called “façade conformity”. For some of the more recent signatory states of the EHEA the same can be said. Dang warned of the unintended outcomes at domestic and regional levels which have occurred because the Bologna Process puts “structure before content” (Papatsiba 2006:98) and the newer signatory countries have no choice to negotiate. Typically these are countries with less mature and less developed higher education systems or countries which are still suffering from the aftermath of wars and collapsed economies and thus in need of reform. But as the Bologna Process reforms are voluntary, non-compliance cannot be sanctioned. I will come back to this issue later on in my presentation.

During their meeting in Bologna the Ministers also decided to meet every two years in order to assess the progress of the reform process and decide about the next steps to be taken. The following Table (Table 1) provides an overview of the meetings and the increase in signatory countries.

**Table 1: Development of the Bologna Process (Meetings and Members)**

<b>Ministerial Meeting</b>	<b>Signatory Countries</b>
Sorbonne/Paris, France, 1998	4
Bologna, Italy, 1999	29
Prague, Czech Republic, 2001	33
Berlin, Germany, 2003	40
Bergen, Norway, 2005	45
London, United Kingdom, 2007	46
Leuven, Belgium, 2009	46
Budapest, Hungary; Vienna, Austria, 2010	47
Bucharest, Romania, 2012	47
Yerevan, Armenia, 2015	48
Paris, France, 2018	48
Italy, 2020	

Each meeting of ministers after the one in Bologna ended with a Communiqué assessing the progress of the reform process as well as sometimes adding new reform goals, sometimes refining existing ones.

The European Commission was very surprised about this development because the Bologna Declaration was what it had always wanted but could not bring about

because it did not have many competences in the field of education and higher education. So the European Commission practically bought itself into the process by offering to provide funding for an infrastructure to accompany the reform process and in return asking to be accepted into the core group. Still, the question remains whether the establishment of a European Higher Education Area was based on an educational vision or whether economic rationales were dominant while educational and cultural benefits were a welcome side-effect.

## **2. The Ministerial Meetings and Governance of the Process**

The next two meetings of ministers after the Bologna meeting were focused on discussions how to refine the Bologna Declaration with its originally six reform issues. Ministers agreed to name the first two cycles of study Bachelor and Master and to apply the ECTS credit point system which so far was only used for recognition of study achievements abroad to all study programmes within a national higher education institution. In order to create more transparency of degrees and thus make recognition easier, the Diploma Supplement was introduced, a document describing the university which had awarded the degree and the study programme a student had successfully completed. The Bergen meeting in 2005 brought a further addition to the reform agenda, namely to include doctoral studies as a third cycle. This was easy to accept in those signatory countries which saw doctoral students as students and also had tuition fees. It was hard to accept (and still has not been really accepted) in other countries which saw doctoral students not as students but as early career researchers who were often employed as junior research and teaching assistants by their university.

By 2010 and with the official establishment of the European Higher Education Area, the process seemed to lose steam and its sense of direction. Stock-taking and monitoring reports showed that implementation varied and that some countries were far from fulfilling their obligations (Bergan, Deca 2018: 303). Nevertheless, the structural reforms were the most successful elements of the reform process. What was lacking was an agreement on the fundamental values underlying it, e.g. academic freedom, institutional autonomy, contribution to democratic citizenship, etc. I will pick up this issue at a later time in my presentation. In terms of uneven implementation of the reform agenda, there was talk about a Bologna process with “two speeds” which took into account that some countries had signed the Declaration later than others and needed more time to fulfil their commitments, thus avoiding the non-compliance question. This was certainly an indication of the inherent tensions in such a voluntary process in which no single body had the authority or power to change national circumstances and force laggards to act. In 2015, at the ministerial meeting in Yerevan, an advisory group on non-compliance was established but rather than designing some form of sanction for non-compliant signatory countries, the ministers opted for an emphasis on learning from each other and providing expert support when help was requested.

At the same ministerial meeting, a discussion about the future of the EHEA emerged also taking into consideration the phase after 2020 (Bergan, Deca 2018: 300). The

communiqué issued at the end of the meeting emphasized four issues to be worked on in the next phase:

- Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning
- Fostering employability of graduates
- Making the higher education systems more inclusive
- And implementing agreed structural reforms.

As the ministerial meetings only took place every two years and, since 2012, every three years, a “loose organisational structure” (Bergan 2015: 735) was established to prepare the meetings and discuss relevant issues in between these meetings. The most important body of this structure is the Bologna Follow-up Group.

The **Bologna Follow-up Group** (or BFUG for short) is in place since autumn 1999. It oversees the Bologna Process between the ministerial meetings, pays attention to implementation through stocktaking and monitoring reports, and develops the overall process. The BFUG acts as an executive body and is composed of representatives of all signatory countries and the European Commission. The BFUG also cooperates with consultative members (e.g. the European University Association and the European Students’ Union), partners (e.g. The European Association for International Education, the European Association of Trade Unions) and expert groups (e.g. the European Statistical Office, EURYDICE). It is supported by the **BFUG Board** which acts as an advisory committee for the BFUG Chairs and Secretariat and prepares the BFUG meetings which take place about every six months. The BFUG does not have its own budget.

The **Bologna Secretariat** was established after the Berlin ministerial meeting in 2003. It is the Secretariat of the BFUG currently held by Italy which will host the next ministerial meeting in 2020. Its main tasks are:

- To support the BFUG chairs in their work
- To provide administrative and operational support for the BFUG and its Board
- To support all BFUG working and advisory groups
- To act as external and internal contact point for the EHEA
- To support the preparation of the ministerial meetings
- To maintain the EHEA website.

Finally there are the Bologna Researchers’ Conference and the Bologna Policy Forum.

The **Bologna Researchers’ Conference** has been organised three times so far: in 2011, 2015 and 2017. It is a conference for the voice of the researchers on the Bologna Process and the EHEA. The Conference was originally initiated 2008 in Ghent when the Flemish Communities of Belgium and Luxemburg organised a seminar on “Bologna 2020: Unlocking Europe’s Potential – Contributing to a Better World”. The discussions during the seminar were based on a survey of stakeholders and a research project in which I happened to be the principal investigator and the chief editor of the book that was published with the results of the project and entitled “The EHEA – Perspectives on a Moving Target”. The project collected the views of

researchers on a variety of topics emerging from the Bologna Process (Kehm et al. 2009).

The establishment of the **Bologna Policy Forum** was recommended by a BFUG Working Group in 2009. So far there have been four forums: 2009 in Leuven, 2010 in Vienna, 2012 in Bucharest and 2015 in Yerevan. The Policy Forum is intended (a) to bring together participants at ministerial level, stakeholders and civil servants from EHEA countries and countries not being part of the European Cultural Convention (for example representatives of the ASEAN higher education area); (b) to involve participants in policy dialogue on specific topics (e.g. mobility, quality assurance, recognition, etc.) and on higher education reforms in general; and (c) make full use of existing EU and UNESCO initiatives. The Policy Forum is held in conjunction with the ministerial meetings and aims especially to be a platform for policy debate between EHEA ministers and ministers from other parts of the world, some of which have shown great interest in the Bologna process. However, Bergan and Deca (2018: 313) contend that “it has proven difficult to move beyond relatively superficial discussions or to maintain political interest”. So one of the many remaining challenges for the EHEA is to organise a more fruitful cooperation with other parts of the world, especially since a globalisation strategy has been included into the reform agenda.

Bergan (2015: 728) echoes Papatsiba (2006) by stating that the first decade of the Bologna Process “was characterised by a strong concentration on structural reforms” He characterises implementation as a challenge and an “unfinished business” (ibid.) which “implies shifting the focus from the European to the national and institutional level” (ibid., 729). Both Bergan (2015) and Harmsen (2015) agree that “there appear to be significant disconnects between the Bologna Process/the EHEA and its national counterparts” (Harmsen 2015: 791; similarly Bergan 2015: 729). However, the concentration on structural reforms also enabled policy makers from very diverse higher education systems to cooperate and agree on relatively clear objectives. But the implementation challenge remains because national policy makers also attached their own national reform agendas to the Bologna Process in order to weaken potential resistance from national stakeholder groups. In other words, what has been called “Bologna” by national policy makers with all the implications of it being a done deal and no discussion or change possible, has not always been “Bologna” (and sometimes has been called “Bolognese” or even “boloney”).

### **3. Changes in Study Structures and Degrees**

After having given you an idea about some of the political and administrative features of the Bologna Process and the EHEA, I now want to come to the main ideas of the Bologna reform process, namely to create a harmonised structure of study programmes and degrees so that students can move freely within the EHEA with all study achievements recognised abroad and at home at approximately the same quality.

That was easy in some countries and not so easy in others, Germany among the latter. It is necessary to understand that at the start of the Bologna process many continental European countries did not have a two-cycle study structure as was and still is the case for Anglo-American countries. In particular, there was no Bachelor level degree. All university studies in Germany ended with a first degree at the level of a Master degree (after 4 to 6 years of study) even if the names of the degrees varied; e.g. a *Magister* as an academic degree without a clearly defined field of professional practice, a *Diplom* as a professional degree, for example in economics or engineering but also typical for sociology, and a state examination for the state regulated professions (teaching, law, medicine).

The Bologna Declaration, to which Germany also had committed immediately, suddenly prescribed to introduce a lower level degree (later called Bachelor) which at the same time was supposed to prepare students for transition into the labour market. In Germany, students, professors as well as employers protested against such a reform because they argued that a Bachelor graduate would only be half an engineer or half an economist and would by far not have sufficient higher level qualifications and knowledge to be able to move into a job. Supporters of the Bologna Process triggered a big campaign arguing that the study content within these two new study cycles had to be redesigned to make graduates employable. Only in 2004, the German states issued guidelines how to design the new study structures and degrees and Germany, despite having been involved already in the Sorbonne Declaration, suddenly found itself among the laggards (Kehm 2005; Kehm 2010). The guidelines clarified that study structures had to be modularised and achievements formulated and assessed in terms of learning outcomes, that each module had to have a certain number of credit points which also specified the input in terms of working hours expected from the student, that teaching was to become student centred and the study duration for a Bachelor degree was to be three years and for a Master degree two years. Other continental European countries opted for Bachelor programmes to have a duration of three and a half or even four years with consecutive Master programmes then lasting one and a half or only one year. The Bologna Declaration had only prescribed that the duration of the first cycle of studies had to have a minimum of three years and that the overall duration of the first two cycles, i.e. Bachelor and Master should not exceed five years. By only determining the minimum duration of the first cycle and not the maximum duration, Bologna signatory countries had some leeway in how to adapt the reform agenda to their national circumstances.

Like most other signatory countries Germany also had its own agenda for which the Bologna reforms were deemed to be useful. One issue was to get more students in a shorter time through the system and reduce **drop-out**. With more students graduating after three years and more structured study programmes it was hoped that this could be achieved. Most of you might know that due to the lack of a proper tracking system drop-out is perennially difficult to determine in the German higher education system. In addition, drop-out is very subject-specific, i.e. low in medicine and teacher education, high in the humanities and social sciences. The most recent study about student drop-out in Germany from 2017 (Heublein et al. 2017) was able

to show that drop-out of Bachelor students was 20% in 2010/11 and of Master students 17% in the same year which was not very much different from earlier figures. However, the study also showed that drop-out in the humanities had been clearly reduced.

Another issue, which I want to present here as an example, is student **mobility**. Many students and academics in Germany worried that the more structured study programmes did not include time windows for mobility or that mobility might contribute to a lengthening of study time. This did not become reality. German students seem to be the most mobile ones in Europe. In 2017, temporary study abroad of German students was 38% which is way above the 20% goal of the European Commission for 2020 (DAAD/DZHW 2017, p. 76). European studies about temporary student mobility have, however, shown that the 20% goal will not be reached in the majority of EU member states and that take-up rates have significantly decreased over time in all countries. Last but not least, the fact remains that non-mobile students, for whatever reason, continue to constitute the majority. And while some countries have actively sought to mitigate this problem by spending effort, energy and money on developing 'internationalisation at home', German higher education institutions are not yet doing well in this aspect, despite the fact that there are a number of examples of good practice. And German higher education institutions have tended to handle **recognition** issues too bureaucratically. Furthermore, recognition has deteriorated to some degree due to the level of specialisation within Bachelor programmes as well as among Bachelor programmes with resulting compatibility problems. This has been a result of studies at the national as well as at the European level (Gaethgens 2007; Heine & Müßig-Trapp 2007). Hellmann (2007: 127) comes to the conclusion that the Bologna reforms facilitate vertical mobility (Bachelor at home, Master abroad) and integrated mobility (optional or prescribed mobility phases integrated into the curriculum) but impede the freely organised longer term mobility which used to be very popular among German students, due to the more structured curricula.

Concerning the **employability** of Bachelor graduates, which was seen as highly critical in the beginning, they have found more acceptance on the labour market in the meantime, in particular those from the universities of applied sciences. Universities still encourage their students to aim for a Master degree and, at least in Germany, 80 to 85 percent of the students do so.

What varies considerably among the Bologna signatory countries is the understanding of **modularisation** and the perspective of **learning outcomes** and their assessment. It is typical for curriculum construction that what was previously called a seminar or a lecture plus tutorial is now simply called a module, although a real module follows a different logic. Professors have also learned to formulate the aims of their seminars in terms of learning outcomes, i.e. "... at the end of the course students should be able to do this or that and to know this or that or to demonstrate this or that...", but most teaching is neither student centred nor is there a proper assessment related to learning outcomes. That would require assessing the state of knowledge that students have before the beginning of the module and then assessing or measuring it afterwards in order to determine the added value in terms

of the learning outcomes a module has provided. Furthermore, the attempt to cast doctoral education as a third cycle of studies has been rejected by most continental European countries. For example, in Germany more than 60 percent of doctoral candidates (in some subjects up to 80 percent) are part-time employees of the university and thus members of the junior academic staff. The European organisation of doctoral students (EURODOCS) has proposed to refer to doctoral students as “early career researchers”. Only countries that clearly see them as students and even require tuition fees for this phase of qualification (for example, the UK) continue to call them “(doctoral) students”.

Clearly there is still a lot to be done to fully achieve the goals of the Bologna Process and the EHEA and I have just provided a few examples of what does not or not yet work. What I have termed the implementation challenge points to a number of weaknesses and problems when we look at the national and institutional level. Therefore, the question mark in the title of this Conference is valid. The Bologna Process and the EHEA have been a surprising success in terms of harmonising the structure or – as the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration called it – the “architecture” of the European higher education landscape (I hesitate to call it a system in the singular). But was it an “educational vision”? In looking more closely at values and content we find much more diversity and clearly less of a shared vision. Together with a look into the future of the EHEA I will attempt to explain this in my conclusions.

#### **4. Conclusions: A Peek into the Future**

Already in 2009, the ministerial Communiqué issued at the meeting in Leuven looked beyond the magic date of 2010 and into the decade up to 2020. The Communiqué stated that “increased momentum and commitment beyond 2010” (Leuven Communiqué 2009) was required in order to achieve the objectives of the reform process.

The ministerial meeting in Yerevan in 2015 also attempted to look into the future in order to develop a “renewed vision” and to determine the main issues and challenges until 2020. Façade conformity and non-compliance in some signatory countries were mentioned in the Communiqué as a persisting problem that “undermines the functioning and credibility of the whole EHEA” (Yerevan Communiqué 2015, p. 3). But in my view there is a further problem preventing the development of a vision or even a ‘renewed vision’. Harmsen (2015: 797f.) has formulated it to the point by stating that the European Commission’s modernisation agenda for higher education has a “one-dimensional perspective on the economic dimension of higher education alone” which leads to “policy priorities exogenous to the sector”. He proposes to broaden the discussion about the purposes, uses and values of higher education in and for society to include a much wider variety of stakeholders and start a real dialogue.

In their analysis of the Bologna reform process Bergan and Deca (2018: 314ff.) identify a number of challenges for the further development of the EHEA, among them



- Finding an attractive way to organise fruitful cooperation between the EHEA and other parts of the world and define priorities for that cooperation.
- Identify credible goals, ensure credible implementation and develop credible governance for the EHEA.
- Pay more attention to the influence of demographic developments in terms of student numbers and the effect on higher education.
- Find a broadly shared way to deal with non-compliance or non-implementation of specific aspects in some of the signatory countries.
- Find a broadly shared common understanding of the values underlying the process.

However, Bergan and Deca (2018: 316) rightly ask whether it is actually possible to finalise the Process and have the European Higher Education Area fully implemented. Challenges can be met provided there is “political and practical will to do so” including the provision of the necessary funding, but full implementation would make the EHEA increasingly irrelevant, perhaps even dead (ibid.). And with “dead” the authors mean that full implementation would also mean normalisation so that nobody would talk about it anymore or would pay attention to it. Even hating it would be better than ignoring it. Thus it is worthwhile, especially for higher education researchers, to continue to observe and analyse the process and perhaps compare it to similar developments in other parts of the world.

And with this I would like to make a couple of last points. Among researchers of the Bologna Process warning voices have become louder in recent years that point to the growing standardisation in the EHEA (through law, regulation, networking and harmonisation). This standardisation creates a new form of governance of the educational policy arena at European level (Lawn 2011, Elken 2017) and as Lawn (2011, p. 259) pointedly put it “governing by standards excludes politics and relies on experts”. It is an increasingly shared view among higher education researchers that standardisation based on expert knowledge leads to de-politicisation. Not only does standardisation disguise political power in technical form (see for example the European Standards and Guidelines) and consensual process but the “European goal of a knowledge economy joins together in practical ways the economic and the educational and transforms them both” (Lawn 2011, p. 269 and 263). This might also be the reason why the Bologna Process has been so attractive for so many states beyond the European Union member states. And in the face of this development Bergan and Deca’s demand to find a broadly shared common understanding of the values underlying the process finds its true meaning because standards are related to structures but values to content.

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**Note:** The Bologna Declaration and all Communiqués issued at the end of each ministerial meeting can be accessed through the EHEA website:

<http://www.ehea.info/pid34363/ministerial-declarations-and-communiques.html>