

Conference of Directors General for Higher Education and Heads of the Rectors Conferences of the European Union

Transnational Education - Higher Education

THE FOLLOW-UP OF THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION

1. Introduction

After the signing of the Bologna Declaration¹ by 29 countries, the background report, prepared for the Bologna Conference, has been published. The Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities (CRE) have prepared a short text explaining the Bologna Declaration².

To follow-up the Bologna Declaration, two groups have been set-up:

- a group of representatives of all signatories, the enlarged group;
- a steering committee composed of representatives of the enlarged troika (Finland, Portugal, France and Sweden), the Czech Republic (that will host the Ministerial Conference in 2001), the Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the CRE, with the participation of the Commission.

The enlarged group met in Helsinki, on the 16th November 1999, and the steering committee met in Lisbon, on the 31st January 2000. At these meetings the work programme, leading to the Ministerial Conference in Prague in 2001, has been defined.

2. The Bologna Declaration

The Bologna Declaration has the following main goals:

- Competitiveness of the European System of Higher Education;
- Mobility and employability in the European Space.

To reach these goals, some objectives were defined:

- a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, including the implementation of the Diploma Supplement;

- a system essentially based on two main cycles:
 - a first cycle relevant to the labour market;
 - a second cycle requiring the completion of the first cycle;
- a system of accumulation and transfer of credits;
- the mobility of students, teachers, researchers, etc;
- the co-operation in quality assurance;
- the European dimension of higher education.

The declaration calls for intergovernmental co-operation and for the contribution of the institutions of higher education to the process.

3. The work programme

The programme of work, agreed in Helsinki and Lisboa, includes the following actions:

- national seminars;
- extension of the trends study to the Eastern and Central European Countries;
- international seminars:
 - credit accumulation and transfer systems (Portugal, September 2000);
 - short cycle university degrees (France or Finland);
 - transnational education (Sweden, 1st semester 2001);
- report to the Ministers of Education on the progress of the European Higher Education Area;
- academic meeting organised by the Confederation and CRE;
- meeting of the Ministers of Education (Prague, May/June 2001).

The meetings of the steering committee and of the enlarged group, already programmed are the following:

- steering committee: 29th June and 10th October;
- enlarged group: 30th June and December.

4. Competitiveness, mobility and employability

To achieve the main goals of the Bologna Declaration, changes are required. These include national reforms, but also implementation of the reforms at institutional level, as well as changes in attitude.

Degrees, diplomas, modules and credits

International recognition of European qualifications and periods of study requires that mutual recognition is achievable within the European Space (the Bologna Declaration signatories) and within each country.

A concrete step towards this recognition may be the use of a coherent elementary unit of study, as in a common credit accumulation and transfer system. Would it be possible to identify more elaborate units? The most radical solution would be to have the same degree and diploma system throughout the European Space, which I think is out of the question. However, a less radical solution would be to be able to identify common European levels of reference, eventually by fields of knowledge. Conscious of the difficulties, I believe that this road is worth exploring.

Type and status of the institutions

Within each of the signatory countries there are often institutions of higher education that differ in terms of mission, autonomy, degrees that they may award and, as a consequence, in status. This fact may hinder the universality of recognition of degrees, but also of credits.

This problem, that now-a-days exists within the boundaries of individual countries, will not be solved by the simple fact of defining a credit accumulation and transfer system. Mutually recognised quality evaluation may contribute to reduce the problem, but will it be enough? What additional measures or what mechanisms have to be built into the credit system to ensure universal recognition of credits in the European Space?

Recognition of quality evaluation

Quality evaluation is an essential instrument to build trust on the qualifications and credits delivered by other institutions, both at national and European level. The building of trust among institutions of higher education requires that the evaluation process in each country is known and its validity recognised by the institutions of other countries.

If this is important for the exchanges between traditional institutions of the European Space, this is, however, not enough to take into account transnational education, as it may avoid being subject to quality evaluation. The only possibility to convince transnational education to accept being evaluated is by raising the awareness of the public, specially the potential candidates to this offer of higher education, of the relevance of evaluation, promoting public demand.

An effort should, therefore, be made in order to enhance public recognition of the value of quality evaluation. Also, the Diploma Supplement could include a reference to the evaluation and/or accreditation process in which the programme is included.

Response to the needs of candidates/students

A relevant argument to attract students to a given programme and institution of higher education is an adequate response to the specific needs of the candidates/students. As the importance of lifelong learning increases and the institutions open to new publics, more diverse are the needs and the responses required. The following are some of the responses that may be given:

- validation or accreditation of prior education and training, be it formal or non-formal, and experience;
- rhythms and organisation of studies adequate to the social, family and professional situation of the candidates;

- guarantee of the studies being credited towards a degree;
- diversification of the offer, in terms of objectives, duration, etc;
- availability of financial support and possibility of managing the time at employment to attend the programme;
- transparency in the offer, in terms of learning objectives, credit system and support.

Knowledge about the European institutions of higher education

For the European offer of higher education to be competitive, information must reach the potential candidates. Publicity is an option, but not the only one. Co-operation with institutions of other countries, outside the European Space, may contribute to make the European institutions of higher education better known. The offer of transnational education by European institutions outside the European Space, ensuring the necessary quality of the programmes, is another option that may be considered.

5. Challenges

It is generally acknowledged that success of the Bologna Declaration is not forthcoming. It requires a permanent drive to overcome the obstacles that will be encountered. The fact that it is a process with a very large number of actors does not make it easier.

One of the challenges is to ensure that reforms are convergent at European level or that, at least, are not divergent. National circumstances and some specific group and institutional interests may create some tension in pursuing this objective.

Another challenge is to maintain the momentum in the face of difficulties and set-backs that inevitably will arise in the process.

Finally, in order to improve the chances of success all stakeholders must be involved. The position of the students in Bologna has shown that, not having been involved in the preparation, they were not motivated by the process.

6. The role of administrations and institutions

To achieve the goals and objectives of the Bologna Declaration it is important that consistent steps are taken by both administrations, at national or regional level, and institutions of higher education, depending on the assignment of responsibilities. Whenever reference is made to the role of administrations, it should be taken into account the role that may be played by the EU.

The role of the administrations

The decisions taken and the reforms carried out by the administrations should consider the engagements assumed in Bologna and endeavour to induce a convergent rather than divergent process. National laws and regulations are different and some of the points below may not be applicable to all signatory countries. The following are domains where adequate action may favour the Bologna process:

- supporting mobility of students and staff;
- promoting the development of quality evaluation and the relevance of the programmes;
- ensuring that academic and professional accreditation is consistent with the defined goals;
- defining a policy for lifelong learning;
- promoting national and international co-operation;
- supporting European transnational education offer outside the European Space;
- financing institutions through schemes that favour the objectives defined.

The role of the institutions of higher education

Although the Bologna Declaration was signed by the Ministers of Education, given the autonomy of most the institutions of higher education, the success of the Bologna process depends, to a large extent, on the attitudes and initiatives of these institutions. The following are some the attitudes and initiatives that may favour this success:

- an open attitude towards reform, in a constructive dialog with national and international partners and stakeholders;
- a flexible attitude towards the recognition of qualifications, periods of study and knowledge and skills acquired in non formal settings and through experience;
- attention to the motivations of candidates and students, including new target groups, in terms of diversification of the offer (short and/or degree courses), relevance of the training provided, credit awarding at short and non degree programmes, adequate rhythms and organisation of study and, in general, a lifelong learning approach;
- joint programmes with institutions of other countries (it may be easier at post-graduate level and research);
- international co-operation, in general;
- transnational offer, including in partnership with institutions of other signatory countries, submitted to recognised evaluation system or systems.

7. Background studies

To proceed on sure ground, information on and understanding of reality, in the different signatory countries, is essential. The following are some of the topics for study that may contribute to a better mutual understanding or common approaches:

- study of credit accumulation and transfer systems (work under way);

- study on the transnational education offer in Europe, including the analysis of the motivations to chose this type of offer;
- identification of the obstacles to and motivations for lifelong learning;
- survey of the existing academic and professional accreditation systems in the European Space;
- survey of the systems and practices of recognition of qualifications, periods of study and experiential learning.

8. Conclusion

For the Bologna Declaration to give rise to a real process, it requires the concerted effort of numerous actors. The higher education systems are the responsibility of national (or regional) administrations and of the institutions themselves. Everybody, or almost everybody, will adhere to the goals underlying the Bologna Declaration. However, it is when decisions and concrete steps have to be taken, that this concerted effort must not be forgotten, if we want to move towards a more competitive and friendly European Space of higher education, composed of more compatible and comparable national degree systems.

REFERENCES

1. Guy Haug, Jette Kirstein and Inge Knudsen, *Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education*, The Danish Rectors' Conference, August 99.
2. *The Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education: an explanation*, Confederation of the EU Rectors' Conferences and Association of European Universities, February 2000.