

SPECIAL FEATURE

# “The Bologna Process” A European Response to Global Competition in Higher Education<sup>1</sup>

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The Bologna Process is the most important recent development in higher education policy at the European level. Initially North America observed this reorganisation of Europe's higher education architecture with some scepticism and even mild irony – if not outright ignoring it. More recently, however, the obvious success of attempts to create a “European Higher Education Area” has increased the interest on the other side of the Atlantic. This paper provides a short overview of the initial goals of the Bologna Process, the present state of implementation, and of the difficulties this process faces. I begin by asking to what extent a European level of higher education policy making exists at all and what is its significance.

## Does European Higher Education Policy Exist?

A good starting point to answer this question might be a short reflection on the paradox of European integration. It is obvious that the integration process is a tremendous success story, which has not only fostered economic growth, but has also strongly contributed to the decline of nationalism. Hostility among the various nations of Europe was a major factor in the two world wars, but little more than half a century later, such tensions seem incomprehensible.

And yet European integration faces a major crisis. Irrespective of its economic and cultural merits, its popularity among European citizens has sharply declined in recent years. The European Union is often blamed for the negative impacts of globalization. The attempt to proceed from economic to political integration encounters strong resistance from a variety of different actors. In

France and the Netherlands, once among the driving forces of European integration, referenda have turned down a proposal for a European Constitution.

Rapid expansion in recent years (from 15 to 27 member states) has certainly increased the complexity of the European Union and the fragmentation of political cultures within it.

European higher education policy must be understood within this ambiguity. It is an ambitious and yet highly contradictory goal of the European Union to gain influence over an area of policy making from which it is formally excluded. The Maastricht Treaty<sup>2</sup> which divides the competences between the European Union and its member states defines education at all levels as the responsibility of national governments. The Commission's competence in the education sphere is based on Article 149 of the European Union Treaty which entitles the Community no more than "to contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between member states." Europe takes pride in its cultural diversity, and education systems are regarded as guardians of those diverse cultures. National education ministers watch carefully that the Commission does not interfere into their realm of authority. And yet they were not able to prevent the increasing involvement of the European Union in educational matters. Because the different policy areas are so strongly interconnected, involvement in one area is likely to produce "spillovers" in other areas.

There are two main reasons why the European Union wants to play a greater role in higher education. First, the Commission wants to increase employability, mobility, and international competitiveness of the European workforce (de Wit, 2003). Although education and research systems are key determinants of economic success, policy makers at the European level are not satisfied with the contribution of universities in strengthening the competitiveness of Europe vis-à-vis NAFTA and Asia. Self-sufficiency and fragmentation of national systems are regarded to be the main reasons for this shortcoming. American higher education is widely regarded as a role model for reforms. Since the 1980s, the European Union has made attempts to enhance the competitiveness of European higher education in a global market. One approach is to increase mobility of students and academics among national higher education systems. A Europe wide competition for students, academics, and research funds is supposed to facilitate reforms at the national level with the intention of improving higher education systems.

Second, the European Union is determined to strengthen the "European dimension" of the higher education experience (Field, 1998). Although European integration is a success story in economic terms, it has not yet resulted in a European identity; national mentalities still prevail. However, European policy makers came to the conclusion that technocratic forms of European integration had reached their limits and that a cultural complement— a mutual understanding of language and culture — is required in order to continue to move toward integrating Europe. Most experts agree that political integration is indispens-

able in preserving the European social model. In an age of globalisation, the welfare state cannot be maintained on a national basis.

To reach these objectives, the Commission sees the need for a coherent European Higher Education Area without national barriers that serve to prevent academic mobility. The main route for the European Union to gain influence in higher education policy making was the "year abroad" scheme. The Commission promoted this scheme through its perfectly legitimate role as advocate to strengthen the mobility of students. The Socrates-Erasmus scheme provides financial support to students who take part in exchange programs and study for a limited period in countries other than their own within the European Union. The exchange programs envisaged a world where students accumulated credit for part of their degrees in any European country and eventually moved back home to continue their studies.

However, in the 1980s, when the Socrates-Erasmus scheme was introduced and gained popularity, the European reality did not at all match this vision. Although the number of students who participated in exchange programs soared, national authorities continued to shape the outcomes of this process. Due to the mishmash of incompatible national systems, many obstacles to student mobility remained, in particular resistance of national authorities to recognise foreign degrees or the time spent by students at a foreign university. Hence, although the 1980s and 1990s have seen a growing European influence in higher education policy (Keeling, 2006), national authorities counteracted the vision of the Commission.

### The Bologna Process – The Concept and Its Implementation

Ironically, the most ambitious move to create this coherent Higher Education framework across Europe was not initiated by the Commission, but by the national education ministers. The first step of this process was an event which, as it happened, seemed to have little significance. At the occasion of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sorbonne University in 1998, the education ministers of France, Germany, Italy, and the UK signed the "Sorbonne Declaration," which was a call for more coherence and compatibility of European higher education with the goal of strengthening its international competitiveness. The Declaration included calls for a two-cycle (undergraduate/postgraduate) degree structure and the use of credits. The ministers emphasized their commitment to cooperate and to support reforms along this direction in their own countries.

The "Sorbonne Declaration" was widely covered by the media and, more importantly, it caused some political irritation within the European Union. After all, this declaration was signed by the four largest countries of the Union, and the smaller countries were concerned that the "big elephants" initiated a process that would have an impact across Europe without consulting the smaller member states. To moderate these concerns, the Italian education minister Luigi Berlinguer invited European education ministers to a conference in the city of Bologna to advance the ideas of the Sorbonne Declaration.

While the Commission was certainly sympathetic with these developments, it was not involved formally. To underpin this independence from Brussels, not only the (then 15) member states, but education ministers across Europe were invited to the Bologna meeting. There can be no doubt that the formal separation between the Bologna Process and the European Union eased the move towards a coherent European Higher Education framework. If the Commission had invited the European Union member states to sign the same declaration in Brussels, national education ministers would have had heated controversies over how to dismiss such interference with their sovereignty.

In 1999, 29 ministers finally signed a declaration which is not a legal treaty that has force in international law, but is certainly more than a notice of intent. It is a working program with precisely defined goals, steps, and deadlines. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) should be completed by 2010. To achieve this, follow-up meetings are held every second year and participating countries have set up a monitoring process. Some critics ironically refer to the "Bologna industry" which flourishes across Europe. The next two sections summarise (1) the pillars of the concept and (2) the institutional framework that was set up to realise the vision. In the final section, some weak spots are highlighted and contrasted against the official success stories.

### *Pillars of the Bologna Process*

The Bologna Declaration is an agreement among the education ministries of all participating countries to create the EHEA. Ministers from Bologna signatory countries have recognised the value of qualifications frameworks in making Europe's HE qualifications more transparent and compatible with one another. Qualifications frameworks at the national and European level have the potential to facilitate mobility and qualification recognition across Europe.

The most important pillar of this agreement is the decision that all higher education institutions in Europe will adopt the Anglo-Saxon two-tiered structure of undergraduate and graduate studies with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. This required extensive restructuring of higher education systems in many European countries as Europe traditionally offered only graduate studies (with a first degree equivalent to a Master's degree). Traditionally, higher education in Europe has been a miscellany of incompatible national systems. In the UK, for example, students usually study for three years to gain a Bachelor's degree, then for a further two years for a Master's. In most countries on the European continent, the first degree (traditionally equivalent to a Master's degree) is supposed to be four or five years, but in practice is often six or seven. The Bologna Process aims to put an end to the confusion. Countries that have signed up will move towards a standard, Anglo-Saxon system, based on two cycles (undergraduate and graduate). The Bologna Declaration stated that the first cycle should last a minimum of three years while no length is specified for the second cycle Masters qualification.

Grading, too, will be consistent, which will allow students to transfer credits among universities. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) makes it easier for European students to accumulate credits when switching universities and promotes greater mobility of students within and among different European countries. Credit is seen to have an important role to play in curriculum design and in validating a range of learning in an era of lifelong learning.

In summary, the objectives of the Bologna Process include the creation of a common framework of internationally understandable and comparable degrees, undergraduate and graduate levels of study in all countries, a European approach to quality assurance, and a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The overarching aim is to create a coherent and transparent European Higher Education Area with compatible and high quality systems that will make European higher education more attractive to the rest of the world.

### *Institutional Framework of the Bologna Process*

- Presently (2007) 46 countries participate in the Bologna Process. These are
- from 1999: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom;
  - from 2001: Croatia, Cyprus, Liechtenstein, Turkey;
  - from 2003: Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia";
  - from 2005: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine;
  - from 2007: Montenegro.

Decision making in relation to the Bologna Process is carried out through an "intergovernmental" process whereby ministers from signatory countries meet at biennial summits to assess progress and to plot the course for the near future. Because competence for education lies with European Union member states, such decision making is not administered by the European Commission.<sup>3</sup> Decisions are reached by consensus of all signatory countries involved. This resembles the "Open Method of Coordination" which is the new intergovernmental means of governance in the European Union, and is based on the voluntary cooperation of its member states (Pochet, 2005). This governance structure rests on soft law mechanisms such as guidelines and indicators, benchmarking, and sharing of best practices. This approach acknowledges the diversity in Europe's higher education systems. Biennial summits so far took place in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), and London (2007). The next meeting in 2009 will be hosted by Leuven.

The country hosting the forthcoming Bologna ministerial summit provides a Secretariat for the Bologna Process. The Secretariat has administrative and operational responsibility for the next ministerial conference. The ministerial summits are supported by the Bologna Follow-Up Group and the Bologna Board. The Bologna Follow-Up Group consists of representatives from all Bologna signatory countries. The Group is chaired by the current European Union Presidency, with the host country of the next ministerial summit as Vice-Chair. The role of the group is to help signatory countries follow up on the recommendations made at the ministerial summits. For that purpose, a “stock taking report”<sup>4</sup> is produced that summarises the progress achieved since the last summit. The Bologna Board is smaller and is also chaired by the current European Union Presidency with the host of the forthcoming ministerial summit as Vice-Chair. Previous and succeeding European Union Presidencies are represented. The role of the Bologna Board is to oversee the work between the meetings of the Follow-up Group.

Apart from the signatory countries (who are all members of the Bologna follow-up group), several other actors – for example, students unions and academic unions – are involved in the process as consultative members. Of great importance is the participation and support of the European University Association (EUA)<sup>5</sup> which serves as a bridge between governments and the academic community. Despite resistance from individual academics, EUA supported the Bologna Process from the beginning. It publishes biennial “Trend Reports” (Crosier, Purser & Smidt, 2007; Reichert & Tauch, 2003, 2005) that are stocktaking documents from an academic perspective. Other international organizations include the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE),<sup>6</sup> the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB),<sup>7</sup> UNESCO-CEPES,<sup>8</sup> ENQA,<sup>9</sup> Education International,<sup>10</sup> and BUSINESSEUROPE.<sup>11</sup>

The following issues and strategies emerged during the follow up process:

- The first Follow-Up Summit was held in Prague in 2001. At this meeting, students were recognised as full and equal partners in the decision making process. Ministers emphasized that higher education is regarded as a public good in Europe. The “Joint Quality Initiative”<sup>12</sup> was launched as an informal network for quality assurance and accreditation of bachelor’s and master’s programs in Europe.
- At the Berlin Ministerial Conference in 2003, it was decided that all countries joining the European Cultural Convention are eligible to take part in the Bologna Process, provided they submit a satisfactory plan for implementation of the Bologna goals in their higher education system. The Berlin Communiqué stressed the importance of research in higher education and concluded that the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area are two pillars of the knowledge based society. Hence, the ministers announced that they would go beyond the focus on two main cycles and include the third cycle – doctoral studies – in the Bologna Process.

- Moreover, the Bologna Follow-Up Group was asked to prepare a report on quality assurance and the qualifications framework for the Bergen summit.
- The Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005 adopted an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area and guidelines and standards for quality assurance. The Bergen Communiqué stressed the importance of the "social dimension" (e.g., costs of travel and accommodation) of higher education; in other words, it is not sufficient to postulate academic mobility as an abstract idea but governments must take steps to provide the necessary means.
  - The London Ministerial Conference in 2007 introduced a Register of European Quality Assurance Agencies for higher education. Its purpose is to provide information on trustworthy agencies that work in line the standards adopted in Bergen. The London Communiqué emphasized the need to improve doctoral programs in the third cycle of the Bologna framework. Furthermore, the conference adopted the strategy "The EHEA in a Global Setting" that aims to bring the Bologna framework more closely in line with other parts of the world.

### *Weak Spots of Implementation*

In light of the strong resistance the Bologna Process faced initially from many academics and the scepticism it received even from those higher education actors who sympathized with its agenda, the pace of the implementation of the new study architecture is quite amazing. In most countries, adjustment to the new degree structure is in line with the timetable. The "London Communiqué" which was issued at the 2007 Ministerial Summit states that

good progress is being made at national and institutional levels towards our goal of an EHEA based on a three-cycle degree system. The number of students enrolled on courses in the first two-cycles has increased significantly and there has been a reduction in structural barriers between cycles." (<http://www.cicic.ca/docs/bologna/2007LondonCommunique.en.pdf> p. 2)

Likewise, significant progress has been made in the implementation of ECTS and diploma supplements.

However, this striking success with the most visible and ostensible goals of the Bologna Process hides some ingrained problems which might jeopardize the fundamental intentions of the reform. In a nutshell, the status of the Bachelor's degree is still vague. Many ambiguities regarding the adoption of a true two tier system remain and one gets the impression that many advocates of the Bologna Process underestimate the magnitude of this change.

For centuries, the single tier logic has shaped the attitudes of students and teachers and the expectations of employers at the level of the labour market. According to Clark (1993),

a single tier has predominated in the European . . . mode of organisation, in which the professional school within the university is entered directly after completion of secondary education. With general education completed at the secondary level, higher education has been defined primarily as a place to prepare for the learned professions and the high civil service.” (p. 49)

Hence, implementation of the Bologna Process places high demands on most European higher education systems (Witte, 2004). The mere introduction of an additional degree is not sufficient to change the single tier logic. It is more likely that many actors would unconsciously, if not decisively, assimilate the new degree to the traditional one tier framework by regarding the bachelor's not as a degree in its own right, but rather as an “intermediate degree.” As a matter of fact, this term is often used to describe the bachelor's, in particular in the German speaking countries where higher education is deeply rooted in the Humboldtian tradition that tends to depreciate practical and applied knowledge. The value of the bachelor's degree would then be reduced to an intermediate step on the way to the master's. The implicit conclusion of this interpretation is that all students who complete the bachelor's continue immediately with a master's programme.

In Austria and Germany, for example, there is some indication that the Bologna Process is being implemented in a superficial way (Ash, 2006). In some cases, bachelor's programs are set up by simply dividing a *Diplomstudiengang* (the old type of one tier master's programme, taken after completion of secondary school) into two parts. The curriculum of the bachelor's programme is not shaped by the logic of a two tier system, but remains rooted in one tier logic. It is no surprise that the bachelor's degree is regarded to be incomplete.

The transition towards a two tier system is not only a matter of the content of the curriculum, but also of the style and culture of teaching and learning. In higher education systems with a long tradition of two tiers it is understood that the culture of undergraduate education differs from that of graduate programs. The Humboldtian idea of “unity of teaching and research” is not applied at the undergraduate level, but to graduate – mainly PhD – programs. In the German speaking countries, attitudes differ. The reality of overcrowded study programs with very large student/teacher ratios is in sharp contrast with with any serious involvement of students in the research of their professors. Paradoxically, however, the idea of “unity of teaching and research” is still regarded as the essence of any kind of higher education.

This serves to legitimate a *laissez-faire* culture of teaching and learning with high degrees of freedom for both teachers and students. Neither side has too many formal obligations. From the first semester onwards, students are assumed to be “apprentice researchers” who are capable of conducting their studies in a completely independent way and do not need close supervision and monitoring at universities. Students either attend lectures and seminars or they do not; the duties of academics are equally relaxed. Student progress is not monitored by their instructors, because this is considered to contradict the



ideal of freedom of learning. Any move towards a more structured curriculum with explicit obligations for both students and teachers is pejoratively called *Verschulung* – a move towards a school-like curriculum that eliminates the differences in the learning cultures of schools and universities. Moreover, the objective of modularising is not compatible with a system that is still built on extensive comprehensive examinations instead of achieving graduation by accumulating credits points for modules. Hence, although ECTS is being increasingly introduced, it is often used in a very formal, superficial way.

The acid test of successful implementation of the Bologna architecture will be the acceptance of the bachelor's degree in the labour market. So far, employers are rather sceptical. Ironically, although employers' associations are among the most vigorous advocates of the new study architecture – because they strive for a shorter study duration – individual employers tend to regard the bachelor's as an intermediate degree and prefer a master's degree. It does not help to overcome this scepticism that, for example, in Austria the government, which is the most important employer of graduates, does not yet recognise the bachelor's degree for high level civil service positions.

To summarize, there is a danger of narrowing the implementation of the Bologna Process by adopting superficial indicators. To avoid that the adoption of a Bologna style study architecture results in a Potemkin Village, more attention should be spent on the different logic of one tier and two tier higher education systems.

### Inconsistencies of the European Higher Education Area

#### *"Nondiscrimination" Policy within the European Union*

The Bologna Process is a bold movement to harmonize the European study architecture that will definitely facilitate and increase academic mobility among its nations. However, to realize the EHEA, it is not sufficient to have regulations that guarantee credit transfers and the recognition of degrees. Mobility within Europe must be compatible with the funding patterns of higher education. The EHEA, in its present shape, suffers from some basic inconsistencies, which places severe obstacles in the way of its full realisation. These inconsistencies mainly result from the overlapping competences of European and national decision makers and the conflicts of interests at these two policy levels.

To underpin its vision of a fully integrated Europe with a high level of mobility across national borders, the European Union has passed regulations which do not allow any membership government to discriminate against citizens of any other member state. In many (but not in every) respect, every European Union member state must treat all European Union citizens as it treats its own citizens. However, this vision of an fully integrated EHEA where all citizens have equal rights clashes with the reality of higher education systems that are funded by national governments. Among the nations of Europe, the levels of public expenditures for higher education are as diverse as the mechanisms of

funding. Some countries spend around 1.8% of GDP (Sweden, Finland), others mere 0.7% (Italy). Some charge substantial tuitions fees (e.g. England, where fees are now £3,000), in other countries there are no fees at all (the Nordic countries). Equally, large variance exists in the amounts and practices of student aid (Schwarz & Rehburg, 2004).

There is no consensus between national and European politicians about how non-discrimination regulation must be applied to higher education policy. However, in recent years several decisions of the European Court have limited the room for interpretation. For example, European law does not require that individual nation states apply its policies on student aid to all European Union citizens. With respect to access to public universities, however, all European citizens must be treated equally. Austria serves as a case in point, as described in the next section.

### *Open access in Austria*

For Austrian higher education, the regulation of equal treatment constitutes a particular challenge. The country prides itself in its “open access” policy, which is contrary to the *Numerus Clausus* system in Germany or the admission procedures at Anglo-Saxon universities. Any student who has completed the elite track of the secondary school (who holds a *Matura* – the Austrian equivalent to the German *Abitur*) is entitled to enrol at any university, and in any field of study. This is not to say that no restrictions exist at all. University entrance is selective, based on difficult school-leaving examinations. Although the number of entering students is determined by success in school-leaving examinations, the universities have no control over the number who enrol in their particular fields of study.

This system worked sufficiently well as long as Austria had an elite education system in which only a small fraction of the age group was successful at the upper secondary level of higher learning. Increasing successful completion rates of the *Matura* exam (from below 10% in 1970 to 40% in 2005) severely impaired the function of the traditional access procedure. The government insisted that eligible students have unrestricted access but it did not link funding to student numbers. It takes no great imagination to anticipate the consequences of such an open access policy on the conditions of teaching and learning. Funding per student declined significantly in recent decades. Austrian universities share this annoying, but apparently inevitable, development with many of their counterparts in other European countries. What is unique in Austria, however, is the variance in the study conditions among the different disciplines. In some disciplines, student demand constantly and strongly outgrows the supply of study places. Under regular conditions, universities respond to this imbalance by either establishing more study places or applying highly selective admission procedures. Austrian universities can implement neither of these. Hence the student/faculty ratios in some fields of study are extremely high; in the worst cases, there are as many as 400 students per faculty member.

### *The Conflict between Austria and the European Union on Admission Policy*

To narrow the damage for universities, the government limited its open access policy to Austrian citizens. This was perfectly legitimate as long as Austria was not a member of the European Union. When it became a member in 1995, however, it abdicated parts of its national sovereignty and became subject to European law. Despite extensive public debate on this issue, the government ignored the implications of European Union-membership on the access policy. However, in 1999 the European Commission started a legal procedure against Austria due to discrimination against European citizens. In 2005, the European Court ruled that Austria must grant the same conditions of access to all European Union citizens that apply to its native citizens. In order to protect its universities against an uncontrolled inflow of German "*Numerus Clausus* refugees," the Austrian government abolished its open access policy and introduced restricted access in precisely those fields of study where a *Numerus Clausus* applies in Germany.

Politicians and the general public in Austria have responded with refusal and outrage to the decision of the European Court. They argue that education policy is a national responsibility and regard the accusation of the European Commission and the conviction of the European Court as an unjustified intrusion in domestic affairs. The case has resulted in significant deterioration in the attitudes of the Austrian population toward the European Union. Whereas Anti-European resentment is widespread among people with low educational credentials, the educated part of the population usually has had a more pro-European attitude. This issue, however, concerns a matter that is central to social strata with strong educational ambitions. Although most experts agree that the Austrian style of open access<sup>13</sup> is harmful for the quality of Austrian higher education, students and significant parts of the public are still in favour of this policy. Hence there is widespread belief that the European Union has forced Austria to abolish its superior open access policy.

Even worse from an Austrian perspective is that the introduction of a *Numerus Clausus* is not sufficient protection against a huge inflow of German applicants in some fields of study – in particular medicine, dentistry, and veterinary medicine. There is a huge waiting list in Germany for study places in these disciplines (about 60,000 persons). Now that the Court has forced Austria to open its border, many Germans apply to Austrian medical schools. Over the last two years, the number of applications from Germany outgrew those from Austria. In 2005, more German than Austrian applicants passed the test which determines admission to medical school. As a consequence, the Austrian government introduced quotas that reserve three quarters of all medical study places for Austrian citizens. Quotas based on national citizenship, however, are not compatible with the non-discrimination policy of European law, and for that reason the European Union has again threatened to start a legal action against Austria. As a consequence of strong lobbying by the Austrian government, the European Commission has delayed the decision until 2012.

Whatever the solution to this conflict, the case demonstrates that the concept of a coherent European higher education area with unrestricted mobility has yet to be fully realised. Unrestricted mobility is based on the implicit assumption that for every nation, inflows and outflows of students will eventually equalize. In many cases, this is a reasonable approximation of reality. However, in some instances it is a complete distortion of actual mobility patterns. For example, Austria and Germany share a common language, but the size of their population differs by the factor ten (Austria 8 million, Germany 80 million). If a pull factor is at work, such an imbalance can be quite threatening for the smaller country. The strained relationship between Austria and Germany is not the only problem of this kind. A similar mismatch applies to the ratio between France and the Walloon part of Belgium, who are also neighbours sharing the same language. And finally there is the imbalance between the UK, where a minority of students is fluent in other European languages, and the rest of Europe, where almost all students are fluent in English as a second language. All the aforementioned factors distort the naïve concept of a “natural” equilibrium of inflows and outflows of students. Hence, some countries report a significantly greater inflow of students from other countries than outflow of native students going abroad.

In case of a disequilibrium due to unequal mobility patterns, however, there is a clash of two incompatible regimes. One is the legal concept of non-discrimination and universal rights of all European citizens. The other is the national funding of national higher education systems. There are several solutions to this discrepancy. One – rather backward looking, but preferred by most national governments – would be that the European Union lowers its non-discriminatory approach and leaves access policies to be regulated at the national level. A more progressive solution – better in line with the concept of the EHEA – would be a system of transfers, in which countries with excess of incoming students are compensated for the financial burden covered by national taxpayers. The denouement of the present conflict between Austria and the European Union will possibly foreshadow in what direction the EHEA is developing.

### How Will North America Respond to the Bologna Process?

Despite reservations highlighted in the previous section, it is undeniable that the actual achievements of the reform are much greater than most actors would have dreamed of when the Bologna declaration was signed. The scepticism and resistance most academics articulated initially did not disappear, but both are significantly weaker now than a few years ago. Most experts are now convinced that the pillars of the Bologna architecture will be realized in the core areas of Europe by 2010. The European periphery, which joined the process later, will follow in due time. A Delphi Study on the Bologna Process organized by CHEPS (Huisman et.al., 2005) demonstrated overwhelming consensus that the bachelor's/master's structure (3+2 year structure) will be implemented by 2010. Ninety percent of the surveyed experts responded that they consider such

a development probable and desirable. However, experts were much more sceptical with respect to ECTS; only 55% indicated that they believed it is probable and desirable that students can use credits in "supermarket mode."

Evidence for the success of the Bologna strategy comes from a recent worldwide survey on internationalization conducted by the International Association of Universities.<sup>14</sup> (IAU, 2006). Surprisingly, Europe – and not North America – was identified as the most favoured region for future internationalization activities by all six world regions. After Europe, collaboration with higher education institutions in Asia Pacific ranked next in importance, followed by North America in third place. Knight (2007) concludes that this indicates

a strong interest in the new developments and reforms emanating from the Bologna Process . . . . The international profile and perceived benefits of the Bologna Process and the European Union outreach programs are two pull factors making Europe very attractive for future international academic cooperation. (p. 5)

What does the higher education community in Canada and the US think about the Bologna Process? From a North American perspective, many characteristics of the Bologna Process seem strange, even bizarre. First, strong involvement of European governments in academic affairs is met with a lack of understanding. Although state regulation was substantially reduced during the last two decades, it is still quite high by North American standards. Canadians and Americans are also surprised by the highly centralised character of the project, even if it is called an "Open Method of Coordination" by Europeans. A "higher education area" encompassing a huge geographic area already exists in North America, even if it is not named in that way. There is an impressive amount of academic mobility within Canada and the US and across national borders, but this is achieved without any law on non-discrimination imposed on the actors involved. This "higher education area" was not designed top down, but it emerged bottom up during the last century.

Such characteristics, alien to the North American political culture, might explain why the Bologna Process was at the beginning rather dismissed across the Atlantic. "Some American educators have gone so far as to hope (generally off the record) that Bologna deadlines pass without the sort of coordination the countries pledged to achieve" (Jaschik, 2007). More recently, however, the Canadian and American higher education community has realized that the Bologna Process is no short-lived fashion but has reached a point of no return. Moreover, it will seriously affect the academic relations between the two continents. Yet, there is still some uncertainty how this reform should be assessed.

Doubts about the value of the three-year "Bachelor Bolognese" and its implications for graduate admission policies in North America (Aronauer, 2005) remain. All bachelor's degrees in the US and most in Canada are awarded after four years of study. North America has learned to live with the "irregularity" of a three-year bachelor's in the UK and Australia. But now that this kind of de-

gree is spread all over Europe, it seems to overtax the North American imagination.<sup>15</sup> In the past, most European countries conferred the first academic degree after four years of study. Why should the time for the first degree suddenly be reduced to only three years? Why should North American graduate schools recognize three-year degrees and admit such students to graduate programs?

Questions of that kind reveal some basic misunderstandings about the articulation between school and higher education in Europe. Not only is secondary education in Europe more homogeneous than in North America, it is also more academically demanding and advanced. Hence, European higher education institutions have never felt the need to offer the kind of general education that is part of an undergraduate experience in Canada and the US. It is fair to say that it is rather the first year, not the fourth year, that is missing in a three-year European degree. Transatlantic controversies about the equivalence of degrees are nothing new. Before the Bologna reform, many European universities insisted that their first degree should be acknowledged as a master's degree, which was sometimes, but not always, rejected by American graduate schools. As a consequence of Bologna, the focus of the controversy has changed. Now, the distinctive nature of the European bachelor's is at stake. The "diploma supplements," which are introduced by the Bologna reform and provide detailed information on the academic programs for which students receive their degrees, might help to solve the controversy.

There are signs that American graduate schools are moving in a direction compatible with the goals of the Bologna Process. A recent survey of the US Council of Graduate Schools reported some trends toward acceptance of the new European model (Jaschik, 2006). Twenty-nine percent indicated they did not accept three-year undergraduate year degrees in 2005; that number dropped to 18 percent in 2006 (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Graduate School Policies on 3-Year Degrees**

Policy	2005 %	2006 %
Do not accept	29	18
Provisional acceptance	9	4
Evaluate degree for equivalency	40	49
Evaluate candidate for competence	22	29

Source: Jaschik (2006)

In August 2007, at the first-ever global meeting on graduate education in Banff, Alberta, Canada, higher education leaders from Australia, Canada, China, Europe, and the US agreed to a statement of principles. The first of the "Banff Principles"<sup>16</sup> reads as follows: "Respect and learn from the differences in programs and their modes of delivery directed towards our common goal." Along

these lines, leaders of the European and the North American Higher Education Area should be able to agree on the value of their academic degrees.♣

## NOTES

1. This invited paper was the Keynote Address given by Dr. Hans Pechar at the 2006 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education.
2. The Maastricht Treaty (signed 1992) led to the creation of the European Union and was the result of separate negotiations on monetary union and on political union. It led to the creation of the Euro, and introduced the "three pillars of the European Union" (the European Communities pillar, the Common Foreign and Security Policy pillar, and the Justice and Home Affairs pillar).
3. However, the European Commission is having a growing influence over the Process by participating in Bologna decision-making forums and by funding a range of Bologna projects.
4. See Department for Education and Skills (2007) for the most recent stock taking report. Another account of the present state is provided by EU-RYDICE (European Commission, 2007), the education network of the European Union.
5. <http://www.eua.be/index.php>
6. <http://www.eurashe.eu/RunScript.asp?p=ASP\Pg0.asp>
7. <http://www.esib.org/>
8. <http://www.cepes.ro/>
9. <http://www.enqa.eu/>
10. <http://www.ei-ie.org/europe/en/index.php>
11. <http://www.businesseurope.eu/content/Default.asp?PageID=455>
12. <http://www.jointquality.nl/>
13. In a North American context, open access usually means that the door to (public) higher education is open to every graduate of secondary education, but admission to a particular institution depends on negotiating demand and supply. Nobody challenges that the final decision on admission rests with each higher education institution.
14. UNESCO-based worldwide association of higher education institutions in Paris. <http://www.unesco.org/iau/index.html>
15. Students from UK and from the European continent are in many cases treated differently. For example, the web site of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of British Columbia indicates the following: "Important note to students with three-year bachelor's degrees from European institutions (except UK): European bachelor's degrees of three years' duration are considered on a case-by-case basis for graduate admission eligibility." <http://www.grad.ubc.ca/apply/how/require.asp>
16. [http://www.cgsnet.org/portals/0/pdf/mtg\\_BanffPrinciples.pdf](http://www.cgsnet.org/portals/0/pdf/mtg_BanffPrinciples.pdf)

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