

Twelfth OSCE Economic Forum, Prague, 31 May – 4 June 2004
New Challenges for Building up Institutional and Human Capacity for Economic Development and Co-operation

ENGLISH only

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The influence of the Bologna Process on reform processes in higher education in the Caucasus and Central Asia

Only two weeks ago, I talked to the ministers responsible for higher education in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia at a Council of Europe conference. So did my good colleague Vera Stastná, also on the programme today. I dare to say that we were both impressed by the insight in the Bologna Process that was demonstrated by the delegations from the Caucasus.

Clearly, there is an interest for reforms in these countries along the lines of the Bologna Process and also a willingness to co-operate across national borders both regionally and with the European area that should be very promising also for institutions and students.

The Bologna Process now has 40 member states. All states party to the European Cultural Convention are eligible for membership, provided that they at the same time declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process, with the aim to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010. However, the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process may be used for reforms in any country and they may be a very good basis for international co-operation in higher educations also outside the European Region. I shall be very interested in what the next speaker, Rector Kuznetsova from Kazakhstan, is going to say about university reforms in the light of the Bologna Process.

THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION

The 1999 Bologna Declaration points out that a Europe of Knowledge is an important factor for social and human growth. Education and educational co-operation is important for the development of stable, peaceful and democratic societies. The Declaration was formulated in close contact with university representatives, making universities partners in the follow-up.

This follow-up – the Bologna Process – has become the most important and wide-ranging reform of higher education in Europe since thirty years. The ultimate aim of the Process is to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 in which students and staff can move with ease and have fair recognition of their qualifications. This overall goal is reflected in the main action lines defined in the Bologna Declaration:

- Adoption of a system of degrees essentially based on two cycles;
- Co-operation in quality assurance and recognition;
- Promotion of mobility.

DEVELOPMENTS

The follow-up Ministerial meeting in Prague in 2001 confirmed the orientations of Bologna and in stronger terms underlined the importance of higher education for democratic values

and the value of a diversity of cultures and languages as well as a diversity of higher education systems. Students were recognised as competent and constructive partners and the co-operation with higher education institutions was emphasised. A social dimension was introduced by the Prague Communiqué. Higher education was recognised as a public good and a public responsibility.

Since Prague, awareness of the importance of the Bologna process has dramatically increased all around Europe. In many countries one sees the need for substantial reforms in the higher education system. Governments use the Bologna Process to push for national reforms.

When Ministers met again in Berlin last year, they decided to make all countries party to the European Cultural Convention eligible for membership, provided that they implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own system of higher education.

The Berlin Communiqué underlined the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social inequalities both at national and at European level.

To give the Process further momentum, Ministers committed themselves to intermediate priorities for the next two years:

- To step up effective use of the degree system based on two cycles;
- To promote effective quality assurance systems;
- To improve the system for recognition of degrees and periods of studies.

In Berlin, Ministers entrusted the steering of the Bologna Process and the preparation of the next ministerial meeting to the Bologna Follow-up Group, composed of representatives of all member countries. The BFUG is chaired by the country having the EU Presidency. A Board oversees the work between the meetings of the Follow-up Group. The overall follow-up work is supported by a Secretariat provided by Norway - the country hosting the next Ministerial Meeting in Bergen in May 2005.

The Follow-up Group has approved the Work Programme for the Bologna Process up to Bergen. It includes a series of seminars and projects. You will find all this at our web site <http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no>.

CENTRAL ELEMENTS IN THE PROCESS

Degree structure

After in-depth discussions at Bologna Follow-up Seminars, there is a broad agreement that a Bachelor-level degree is a higher education qualification that normally takes three to four years of full-time study. It can be taken at either traditional universities or at professionally oriented higher education institutions. Master's programmes will normally be of 1½ - 2 years duration, the minimum requirements is one year of full time study at master level. Some Master's degrees are research degrees, some are not. Degree programmes at both levels may have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs.

Such degree systems are now in place in practically all Bologna countries. Quite a few countries are keeping their old degree system in parallel with the new, at least for the time being. In many countries that traditionally have had a one-level system, requiring a minimum of 5 or 6 years for the first degree, both academia and the labour market have been sceptical to the much shorter Bachelor's degrees. However, this must be seen as a transition period. The shorter degrees have come to stay.

Recognition

The recognition of qualifications should be based on the general provisions of the Lisbon Recognition Convention for the European Region:

Each country shall recognise qualifications from other countries as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system unless there are substantial differences.

The Convention also implies the appointment of national information centres and the introduction of the Diploma Supplement to facilitate recognition. 31 out of the 40 Bologna countries have ratified the Lisbon Convention. Looking towards the Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia have ratified, whereas Armenia has signed, but not yet ratified.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance systems will play a vital role in ensuring high quality standards and facilitate the comparability of qualifications. Quality assurance has been discussed at a number of seminars as existing systems vary. We now agree that quality assurance systems in each member state should be based on

- a quality culture in the higher education institutions;
- an independent body responsible for quality assurance on the national level.

Co-operation between national quality assurance agencies is essential, developing common standards and common procedures.

SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

Mobility

Mobility of students and academic and administrative staff is the basis for establishing a European Higher Education Area; students and staff should move with ease and have fair recognition of their qualifications. In Berlin, Ministers strongly emphasised the importance of mobility for academic and cultural as well as political, social and economic spheres.

Autonomous institutions

The Bologna Process builds on co-operation and trust between national educational systems and between higher education institutions in Europe. The Bologna Declaration refers to the European universities as partners in the process, underlining their autonomy. In Serbia, a new government has recently set university autonomy aside by firing the rector at one university and installing a new from outside.

Autonomy means that higher education institutions must be given the freedom they need to carry out their mission and they must be in control of their own system. Autonomous

institutions should have the responsibility for the content and methods, relevance and quality of their teaching and research, and for optimal use of their resources and for correct reporting on their use and on results. Thus, autonomy also implies accountability.

Student participation

In Prague Ministers noted the constructive participation of student organisations in the Bologna Process and underlined the necessity to include the students continuously and at an early stage in further activities. In Berlin, students were recognised as full partners in higher education governance and called on institutions and student organisations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance.

Public responsibility for higher education

The Prague Communiqué stated that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. This was reaffirmed in Berlin. Public responsibility is a precondition for a national higher education system. This responsibility must at the very minimum extend to the make-up of the education system, the framework within which higher education is delivered, including the degree system, quality assurance and recognition..

Funding of higher education may also be considered a public responsibility. However, in any system, individuals have to carry some of the cost. Student support is a key economic issue where no readymade answer exists, but which is intimately linked to the public responsibility for making higher education more accessible.

CONSEQUENCES FOR NATIONAL LEGISLATION

The Bologna Declaration was a declaration of intention. To realise the European Higher Education Area, Parliamentary decisions will have to be made in the participating countries, national laws on higher education will have to be changed:

- Universities should be autonomous;
- Students should be full members of the higher education community;
- The degree system should essentially be based on two main cycles;
- Independent national quality assurance systems should be introduced;
- Obstacles to free movement for students and staff should be overcome.

To a large extent, the necessary legal changes have now been made in most participating countries. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina has failed to pass a proposed framework law that would have opened up for a much needed reform, realising the Bologna Process.

An upcoming question is whether the European Higher Education Area should be formalised in some way. We have until 2010 to consider this. A convention, much on the model of the Lisbon Recognition Convention may be one possibility. In any case, I believe that the European higher Education Area will become a reality.

The European higher Education Area will not be closed to the rest of the world. The Berlin Communiqué stated that the attractiveness and openness of the European higher education should be reinforced and encouraged co-operation with regions in other parts of the world by opening Bologna seminars and conferences to representatives of these regions.