

Bologna: fake or promise?

by Ulrich Littmann

It is a strange phenomenon.

Everybody in higher education knows that what is commonly referred to as the 'Bologna process' is moving and can't be stopped – and yet it is viewed with increasing enthusiasm, grave concerns, high hopes, serious doubts, *etc.* Someone with professional roots both in Europe and in transatlantic academic relations cannot help but notice that current discussions have not only a European dimension. There is an American dimension as well. The emergence of a united Europe, the end of the Cold War, and changes around the world during the 1990s were significant also for developments in the operation and cooperation among universities and in the lives of those who cross borders to attend them. When higher education in the socialist bloc had broken away as an Eastern alternative, the so-called Western systems, *ie* Europe and the United States, set sail for a variety of new routes towards educational goals that should fit the needs of the new world order and, at the same time, meet regional and national interests. The variety of routes is the reason for hopes and concerns, for contradictions and misunderstandings, and for too many questions and too many answers – some of which are addressed in the following paragraphs.

My youngsters ask, "Is Bologna a fake or a promise for my future?". What am I to reply?

Basic differences

As far as higher learning is concerned, Europe and the US had much in common and yet there are basic differences. The European authorities in Brussels had integrated training and education into the issues of labour and a common labour market. European academe and its national sponsors, the governments/parliaments, remembered the potential and the history of its universities, and everybody in the field felt the need for reforms in order to modernise and internationalise higher education as a 'public good'. Education was to become another instrument to advance mobility of labour and to establish Europe as a major competitor in international affairs, and this even more so as European academic traditions had served the world in the past. Americans, on the other hand, had integrated European college and university models into (what they call) 'the unique system of US higher education' and transformed it into a giant service industry, mostly not-for-profit. As it turned out, it was exceedingly successful in operating at home, in attracting scholars from abroad, and in recruiting large numbers of students from all over the world whose financial investments in higher education were even reported in US commercial statistics.

Standards

In intellectual circles, the United States appeared to have set standards in academe, or what were mistaken as standards during educational reforms in the (Western) Europe of the late 1960s. The same Europeans, of course, also took satisfaction from observing that the American model offered insights into social mobility, and, with it, incredible shifts towards commercialising higher education. For themselves, Europeans would not overlook the expectation that the average US institution was no match for European traditions, and that many US institutions were/are hardly academic. But by disregarding the bottom two-thirds of American higher education institutions, the upper 'better portion' had everything Europe had been looking for and European scholars had been experiencing. Thus Europeans tended to view 'Anglo-American' higher education as an internationally viable model for new forms of university learning, but also as a competitor – regrettably successful by commercialising higher education – on the worldwide market of education. Yet, at the same time, Brussels entered into agreements with the US on cooperation and academic exchanges.

The Bologna process

The Bologna process is one of many considerations and actions which today affect – as well as haunt, encourage and/or hearten – higher education, its institutions, sponsors, users, and spokespeople around the world. Re-reading the article by James Frey (*EAIE Forum*, vol 5, no 3, winter 2003) on the role and function of higher education in the 21st century facilitates understanding the ensuing confusion. It is difficult to identify the European personalities or the offices or the interest groups that worked on the issues and formulated the Bologna Declaration and subsequent papers, and voiced approval or concern or dissent in the media or in national as well as regional conferences ever since.

American model?

The four basic principles of the Bologna Declaration (easily readable and comparable degrees; two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate; system of credits – ECTS; quality assurance) had clearly been adopted from the American model – but there is reason to assume that the advocates either did not understand the US system or intended to convey the impression that its characteristic procedures could be implanted into Europe with a similar effect as being among the best American universities. To the outside observer this is the crux of the current inconsistencies, debates, and confusions. Space allows just some sketchy remarks, and these have to start with language.

Language

English as the means of communication appears to promote internationalisation because it is spoken and/or understood everywhere, and therefore it is also assumed to be democratic. It offers the linguistic tools to implement the Bologna process and – let's face it – it allows (in the disguise of 'Anglo-American' designation) to adopt, use and usurp terms and procedures from what Europeans understand as the positive mechanisms of the 'better' or 'academic' portion of American higher education. This is one of the confusing and debatable aspects in implementing the Bologna Declaration. Take 'higher education' as an example. For Americans, it includes 'general education requirements' which have to do with fostering intellectual creativity, discipline, and respect far beyond the chosen field of concentration, as well as social competence and sense of achievement. For Europeans, that is, of course, what happens at institutions of higher education. However, the European 'higher education area' leaves the topic of how to identify such institutions to national bodies and, at best, to Brussels, and above all to the conventional wisdom about universities and other tertiary colleges – all working in fields that Europeans consider to be fully or at least partially academic. Older hands in the game remember that in forgotten times the European continental universities were summarised in English as 'institutions of higher learning' – in order to point to the difference of 'education'.

Consequently, terms such as undergraduate or Bachelor assume a meaning different from the American original. But

when such terms are dubbed in Europe as 'international, internationally recognised used/accredited/compatible' and issues to establish 'elite universities' enter the public debate, that suggests that we are dealing with a 'Harvard on the Rhine' (or Danube or Seine or ...). A closer look reveals that other terms and procedures like accreditation, college, control, professional degrees and many others imply, for the 'customers' (as students are suddenly referred to in many conferences), an American quality which they actually do not have. Should we expect that Americans and the rest of the world will adjust to the European format and procedures?

National systems

A more complex situation is surfacing at the present time when the simple Bologna principles with their wide range of interpretations are applied to national systems. Smaller countries – Benelux and Norden – with traditionally high-quality institutions have always been flexible and agile. Problems are and will be prevalent in the larger systems and in the countries which have just returned from a socialist system to national traditions. The well-meaning contemporary observes that in national meetings, conferences, and reports many words are exchanged on restructuring the national landscape of higher education – and the focus is on national interests, priorities, competition rather than on Bologna. It is as simple as this example: the German Bachelor is to be designed so that it grants a formal first academic or professional qualification; however, the future teacher discovers that the state requires a Master degree – and he/she wonders if the choice of institution and subject was or is meeting the promise.

Ranking

Misinterpreting the (US) Carnegie classification as a ranking instrument, institutions try to establish themselves as research rather than 'just teaching' universities, or as 'universities of cooperative education' while each one is claiming autonomy (in the pattern of Harvard, Stanford, MIT) and more money from the public coffer for implementing Bologna. It is difficult for the observer to balance the will and/or need for cooperation *versus* competition within national, European area, and transatlantic partner-

ships. Bergen 2005 will, of course, demonstrate that everything is fine.

Expansion

There remains one small aspect for the professionals in international education and exchange. Intra-European mobility and measures will expand to the wider world with ERASMUS Mundus (the genitive 'Mundi' would have suggested a cooperative project). This may leave serious uncertainties with all members of the transatlantic academic community. Three-year European Bachelor programmes will preclude exchanges of an academic year which in the past have been regarded as the ideal period for 'educational' as well as 'academic' student exchanges. American credential evaluators will be challenged with records (and at best diploma supplements) which may not meet the standards to allow graduate course work in the US. However, as we all know, American higher education is used to competition. It is to the headstart advantage of Bologna-Europe that the United States system has never been very formal as to its academic degrees (most of them are not even protected under the law) and that its legal environment does not provide for formal arrangements in the area of equivalences. Moreover, the professional associations for international education are fully occupied with domestic issues and at best look for opportunities to send young Americans abroad.

Fake or promise?

When I read the news or watch it on TV, I see demonstrations of students, of scholars, and of faculty members. When I hear the politicians and administrators, they debate local issues of reforms in the name of some foggy shade of Bologna. And my youngsters ask, "Is Bologna a fake or a promise for my future?". What am I to reply? ■

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