

Promoting the European Dimension across the Curriculum

Bologna seminar held at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, on 22 January 2010.

This was the fourth in a series of regional seminars, jointly organised by the British Council and the Higher Education Academy, to inform academics of recent developments in the Bologna Process and engage them in thinking about the implications of Bologna for learning and teaching at subject level. The focus of these events was on curriculum development in relation to mobility, study and work placements, and the recognition issues related to mobility and the impact on employability.

120 people (excluding organisers, speakers and workshop facilitators) from more than fifty institutions registered for the event. They included senior institutional managers, staff from European and International Offices, heads of school, directors of teaching and learning, course organisers, quality managers, educational developers, registry staff, student officers and students, but the largest single category was once again teaching staff.

The European Dimension

The morning session, chaired by Richard Atfield (Assistant Director of the BMAF Subject Centre, Oxford Brookes), was introduced by Dr Anthony Vickers (UK Bologna Expert, Essex). Highlighting the work of Stavroula Philippou, he contrasted two approaches to the 'European Dimension' in education - the prescriptive and the exploratory. At the heart of the former is a tension between those who seek to use the curriculum to create a European cultural identity and those who wish to defend national and sub-national identities. The latter approach sees the 'European Dimension' as a dynamic concept, concerned with educating students about Europe (imparting knowledge), in Europe (developing linguistic and social skills) and for Europe (promoting positive attitudes). He ended by suggesting three areas for consideration: curriculum location, content and pedagogy.

The next three presenters discussed Bologna from the perspective of their respective disciplines - Geography, Engineering and Business.

Bologna from the Grassroots

Karl Donert (National Teaching Fellow, Liverpool Hope) described the work of HERODOT, the Thematic Network for Geographers, and the outcomes of its Tuning Project. The network's identification and evaluation of generic and subject-specific competences had assisted course planning, established benchmarks and created a professional profile for the subject. Its research on the academic impact of Bologna had led to the creation of EUROGEO as a professional membership organisation. He concluded by emphasising the importance of subject networks and professional associations engaging with Bologna to promote change and improve quality.

Bologna and Engineering Higher Education in the UK

Richard Shearman (Director of Formation, The Engineering Council) discussed the various factors influencing the reaction of the Engineering community to Bologna, including the fact that it is a global activity and profession (25% of the Council's registrants in employment are likely to be working abroad) of great economic importance to the UK (second only to the finance sector as an exporter of services). Discussions in European forums (e.g. European Society for Engineering Education) and with QAA and the UUK Europe Unit had helped allay fears that Bologna is a threat to

the UK integrated Masters and one-year taught Masters. There is now greater confidence about the adoption of learning outcomes and a better understanding of the issues around ECTS, including the assessment and allocation of credit to work placements. In addition, the development of a European recognition framework for professional accreditation (EURACE) has been a significant step in securing the place of UK Engineering degrees within EHEQF. Although UK participation in the Thematic Network for Engineering (TREE) is as yet very limited, there is now a more positive context in which to try to increase collaboration and student mobility and encourage more academics to engage with Europe.

The European Dimension and Mobility at Sheffield Hallam University

Simon Sweeney (UK Bologna Expert, Sheffield Hallam) described some of the ways in which Sheffield Business School is addressing the challenge of building a 'Culture of Mobility', which have increased applications in each of the last two years. These include a mentoring scheme by former Erasmus exchange students (which also operates when their mentees are abroad), a booklet on exchanges written by students for students, and the promotion of Erasmus at Open Days. The School's Erasmus work placement programme, administered by the Careers and Employment Service, supports student funding applications and placement arrangements. These fully integrated and accredited placements provide practical work experience, which complements the students' academic studies, improves their language skills, increases their awareness of cultural diversity and enhances their employability. Key enabling factors include e-support through the institution's VLE, pre-placement cultural preparation and language tuition, and wholehearted institutional backing. Plans for the future include increasing the number of subject areas, sharing best practice and developing a recruitment strategy to strengthen European links. Future challenges include the decline in language studies, the cost of setting up and maintaining partnerships at a time of financial pressure, reliance on individual academic enthusiasts and catering for part-time students with external or family commitments.

Discussion Session

Karl Donert explained the concept of 'spatial citizenship', one of the multi-disciplinary themes of HERODOT Phase 3, as having to do with the inadequacy of people's mental maps, given the importance of place in our behaviour as citizens. He pointed out that student mobility is facilitated by academic contacts and relationships, such as those fostered by the eighty European networks. The problem is raising awareness among UK academics and getting them to engage with these.

Commenting on the need for students to receive some language tuition even in institutions that teach in English and the problem of catering for minority European languages, Simon Sweeney acknowledged that, although the imbalance between incoming and outgoing Erasmus students is a cost to institutions, the presence of students from other countries benefits those who stay at home.

Anthony Vickers explained that Essex is developing an institutional policy on study abroad and the business case for this, something that few institutions have as yet done.

John Reilly argued that the 'European Dimension' poses challenges for local, regional and national attitudes, particularly as regards the pressing need for curriculum reform in order to create 'mobility windows', as called for in the Leuven ministerial communiqué. In response, Karl Donert suggested

that the 'European Dimension' should be part of the curriculum before pupils reach the age of fourteen: EUROGEO is developing a module for this.

The final question was "Sticks, carrots or labels: which incentives are needed to promote the 'European Dimension'?" According to Simon Sweeney, all three are required but labels (e.g. the ECTS or Diploma Supplement Labels) need to have widespread buy-in in order to create a powerful brand. Unlike Anthony Vickers, who believed that sticks are necessary when other incentives fail, Richard Shearman was not keen on more prescription, pointing out that labels may provide a mechanism but are not yet a brand. Like Karl Donert, he would encourage people to engage in European networks. The panel concluded by agreeing that Subject Centre networks have a significant role to play in Europeanising UK higher education.

Workshops

The afternoon session consisted of six workshops, which were facilitated by UK Bologna Experts.

1. *Lifelong Learning and Recognition of Prior Learning* (Nick Harris)

In his introduction to this Bologna action line, Nick Harris pointed out that the UK has a long track record of RPL, although activities tend to be localised, with isolated pockets of excellence. While most institutions have a policy on lifelong learning and RPL (which are complementary), these policies are generally not very comprehensive. Lifelong learning is partly about widening participation, partly about promoting transfer and progression between vocational and higher education.

He also identified several issues concerning the incorporation of prior learning into other study programmes, including how the quality of this kind of learning can be assured. He then invited the group to consider what the success factors might be and how far models of successful practice can be extended nationally or internationally. Points raised here included the possibility of accrediting centres of excellence across Europe, the opportunity for mutual recognition of accreditation of programmes, the role of national agencies in working with institutions to develop processes of mutual recognition, and the value of lifelong learning networks. The group agreed that this action line is extremely worthwhile but there is as yet no clear implementation strategy.

2. *Curriculum Design for Mobility* (Andy Gibbs)

Andy Gibbs drew attention to the guidance published by the MOCCA project (DAAD, 2008) about integrating transnational mobility into the core curriculum. He also described how Edinburgh Napier is internationalising its curriculum and offering its students mobility opportunities. A student society has been set up to inform the University about what students really want and raise funds to finance mobility. Currently 25% of students in the Nursing School have a mobility experience.

Members of the group then shared their experiences of designing mobility into the curriculum. In one programme at Nottingham Trent, for example, students can choose to spend the second semester of their second year abroad. At another university it was reported that students arrive enquiring about mobility and are offered opportunities in Holland and Italy. Accommodation is a

problem, however, since this has been privatised and the university is very strict about one year tenancy agreements.

With regard to accommodation, it was suggested that institutions should think about having different types of letting agreements: for example, permitting home students to offer space to incoming Erasmus students or to have exchange arrangements with students at their host institution. It was also argued that outgoing students should take responsibility for finding their own accommodation and that the university should merely point them in the right direction.

Among the other issues discussed was raising student awareness about mobility opportunities at an early stage, ensuring that modules taken at the host institution fitted into the student's programme, and the learning outcomes and specific regulations for mobility periods. It was noted that flexibility is a problem in some subjects, such as Education, where there is no interchange of modules. Placements in Nursing tend to be shorter (4 to 10 weeks) and the relevant professional bodies are happier with this, but finding placements in the NHS for incoming students is difficult and funding remains an issue.

Choosing exchange partners was also discussed. This will depend on what an institution has to offer and the match between the respective curricula and pedagogies. While a very different learning experience can be valuable, students may find it impossible to study successfully if the differences in pedagogy between the home and host institutions are too great. Recognition and grading issues should be resolved in the learning agreement.

Increasing the number of staff exchanges, particularly by new and young staff, was also thought to be important, since those who have had a mobility experience themselves are more likely to encourage their students to be mobile. This could be encouraged by using the staff development budget to fund the release of staff from teaching. Staff with study or teaching experience in another country could be used to mentor others.

Letting staff and students know about all kinds of mobility opportunities, not just those supported by Erasmus, was also agreed to be important. Intensive programmes were mentioned as a valuable opportunity for a shorter mobility experience.

3. *Use of the Diploma Supplement and its Relevance to Employability* (Anthony Vickers)

Anthony Vickers described the purpose of the Diploma Supplement (DS) and showed what it should contain. Institutions were advised to apply through the British Council for the DS Label, which is currently held by Bournemouth, Kent and Swansea.

In the following discussion, it was noted that many more UK institutions issue the DS but possibly lack the quality assurance needed to gain the label: there is, however, an obvious benefit in doing so in terms of transparency.

4. *Meeting the Leuven Targets for Mobility* (Simon Sweeney)

In his introductory presentation, Simon Sweeney invited the group to identify the barriers to achieving 20% mobility by 2020 and how these might be addressed.

The following were identified as barriers: long thin modules that make a semester length exchange difficult; language issues; ignorance of the benefits of mobility; fear of damaging one's final degree; external responsibilities; financial considerations; lack of institutional encouragement (especially from the top) and unwillingness to be flexible.

Ways of overcoming these suggested by the group included: providing free language tuition; widely advertising the benefits of mobility; full commitment by senior managers to a strategy of integrating and accrediting mobility; working with the student union and other bodies and networks; international events; student case studies; providing a platform for returning students; promoting work placements as a more appropriate alternative for some disciplines (e.g. STEM).

5. *Recognition and ECTS* (John Reilly)

The group began by indicating what they hoped to gain from the workshop and set themselves the following goals: to be able to talk knowledgeably to colleagues about ECTS and to know how ECTS relates to the integrated Masters.

John Reilly then outlined what he saw as the key developments in ECTS, as exemplified in the new 2009 Guide: its emphasis on learning outcomes, deletion of any reference to 75 credits for a full calendar year, and a new approach to information on grading. Challenges remained, such as the discrepancy between the total student workload for an academic year (1500-1800 hours) and the corresponding UK figure (1200 hours), and the duration of Masters courses (generally two academic years/120 ECTS credits but with considerable variation). He also identified a number of questions concerning the use of ECTS documents, work placements and recognition.

The group discussed how grade conversions can sometimes be controversial. One member instanced cases of some Erasmus students with poor performance being given preferential treatment while others were disadvantaged/discriminated against by their teachers during mobility. This has resulted in anomalies in students' results: for example, year abroad results being significantly lower than the student's results at the home institution. Other members suggested that this could be because the student put in less work due to the distractions of the year abroad. The key to successful grade transfer, it was suggested, is an understanding of the grading system in the partner institution/department and how it is operated in practice. Good statistical information on grade distribution at the subject level could help in this understanding. Grade transfer should be discussed carefully with partners.

Some members of the group thought that Erasmus bilateral agreements are less rigorous than other inter-institutional agreements. More transparency is needed at the negotiation stage, including more accurate and up-to-date information about the competencies expected.

One member of the group found the fact that Erasmus has no IELTS requirement problematic and asked how an institution should deal with this. They were advised to ask their partner institutions to

ensure that the language proficiency of outgoing students is up to standard; failure to do so would result in termination of the agreement.

The importance of embedding ECTS in all institutional systems was stressed (e.g. including these alongside the UK credits in course catalogues and all transcripts) as this facilitates both inward and outward mobility and increases transparency for students and colleagues in partner institutions. To a question about whether in calculating ECTS one should simply multiply the UK credits by two or whether the workload needs to be reassessed, John Reilly advised that, while the award of credits depends on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, students are concerned about the workload required and so staff need to have a clear idea about what constitutes a reasonable one. Both UK credits and ECTS are based on the understanding that students can be expected to manage a workload averaging 40 hours per week. In this context it was noted that in a number of other EU partner countries the number of weeks in the academic year is greater than the average in the UK.

Discussion then turned to the minimum number of credits required for a second cycle degree (i.e. 90 ECTS) as specified in the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. It was confirmed that the Diploma Supplement can reflect additional credits if these are awarded, provided the number of credits required for a Bologna compatible qualification is achieved.

6. *Assuring the Quality of the Student Learning Experience* (Alex Bols)

Following a brief introduction, the workshop was invited to discuss the ten points of the European Charter for Mobility, identify examples of good practice and suggest how institutions should address each of the points in the Charter.

The group agreed that it is important to promote the ERASMUS programme both at Open Days and at the time students commence their courses. Course directors have a particular responsibility here since they are frequently in contact with students. It is also useful to enlist the help of students who have already participated in the ERASMUS programme in promoting its benefits.

The group identified the following barriers to students undertaking a mobility experience: the belief that spending time studying abroad is irrelevant to their degree; ignorance of the financial support available; the risk of forfeiting a part-time job; and the language barrier.

The group agreed that it is important for students to realise that the nature of their learning experience will differ according to the country they choose for their study abroad period. One member commented that, whereas the academic culture in the UK encourages students to question what they learn, in many other countries students are not encouraged to do so. Another stressed the need to provide guidance for teachers on how to advise students about preparing for their period abroad. The group also discussed whether students should be encouraged to reflect on the differences they encountered and on what they learned from their experience abroad.

The group also considered the position of students who are not able to go abroad because of home commitments; these can benefit from the presence of international students in their classrooms and local communities. It was noted that EU students can also be of great benefit to the local

community: one participant cited the example of Polish students who went into schools in Coventry to help Polish school children overcome language barriers.

Concern was expressed about the possibility that the recently announced funding cuts will result in the closure of more language departments, and that this may prevent the UK achieving the Leuven target of 20% of students having had a mobility experience.

The importance of institutions respecting each others' protocols was also mentioned. At the end of this part of the discussion, one participant wondered whether it is possible to look at the feedback provided by returning students so that institutions can identify any issues that need to be addressed.

The groups were then asked to discuss how institutions should go about meeting the 20% target while maintaining a high-quality mobility experience; the positive and negative impacts of mobility on such a scale; and how institutions can mitigate the negative aspects. It was suggested that all students should be given information about ERASMUS at the beginning of the academic year. They should also receive a clear message about the academic benefits of studying abroad and how this is relevant to their degree. This should be the responsibility of members of staff who have day-to-day contact with students, since they are likely to have the greatest impact. In order to expand the number of Erasmus work placements, institutions need to establish links with businesses.

Given that UK institutions tend to place greater emphasis on recruiting international fee-paying students than on encouraging further Erasmus exchanges, the group agreed there was a business case to be made for the latter by demonstrating how such exchanges can be used to attract students to return for Masters and PhD programmes.

The groups then convened for a brief plenary session at which the main action points from each workshop were noted.

Conclusions and recommendations:

1. Subject networks and professional associations have an important role to play in raising academic awareness of and engagement with the Bologna Process: they should be actively encouraged and supported to do so. Professional bodies should also be encouraged to identify mobility champions.
2. UK higher education has pockets of excellence in the areas of lifelong learning and the recognition of prior and experiential learning. These should be publicly recognised and their good practice widely disseminated. The feasibility of kite-marking institutions or programmes that engage effectively with this aspect of the Bologna agenda (for example, through programme design or support for individual students) should also be explored.
3. Institutions should promote the full range of mobility opportunities to staff and students and widely advertise the benefits and relevance to students of a mobility experience and the funding made available through Erasmus for its support. They should also be encouraged to fund staff mobility as part of continuing professional development and to take deliberate steps to ensure

greater equity of access to mobility opportunities by under-represented student groups. For those who cannot spend a whole semester or a year abroad, institutions should consider shorter programmes, such as Erasmus intensive programmes.

4. The benefits to students and employers of the Diploma Supplement should be promoted, and the development of the new Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) monitored to ensure that it incorporates the Diploma Supplement appropriately.

5. Increasing student mobility requires full institutional commitment from Vice-Chancellors and other senior managers, together with action to integrate and accredit mobility in study programmes and embed ECTS in institutional systems, course catalogues and transcripts.

6. Institutions should make language learning opportunities freely available and encourage students to take these up. They should also work with their student associations to promote mobility by, for example, encouraging and supporting Erasmus student networks.

7. Since Erasmus societies and student mentors have an important role to play in promoting mobility, institutions should be encouraged to investigate the feasibility of providing incentives for students to engage in these support activities by, for example, accrediting the learning they acquire in doing so.

8. Academic staff should be encouraged to work with their European colleagues to overcome the barriers caused by misunderstandings and misconceptions, such as those relating to grade transfers. They should also ensure that students know, before starting their period of study abroad, how their grades will be interpreted and used.

9. Academic staff should be given better guidance about how to prepare students for their mobility experience: for example, helping them to identify and learn from the differences between their home institution and culture and those of their host institution. At the same time, students should be encouraged to find out as much as possible about their new environment for themselves, enjoy the differences and so make the most of their mobility experience.

10. Institutions should ensure that students are clear about their learning programmes before going abroad and that the courses students take while abroad match their degree programme once they return.

11. Institutions should do more to promote the benefit of international students to the local community.

Graeme Roberts (UK Bologna Expert)
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