

The impact of the Bologna process in France

by Chantal Barry



There are many words which might come to mind when you think of the French: 'simple' is probably not one of them, 'complex' might do for a start, and of course 'passionate' would undoubtedly help.

The impact of the Bologna process on higher education in France is far-reaching and extensive given the highly complex system in place before the arrival of Bologna – which many French people will remind you started in the Sorbonne in Paris. This article does

not claim to be exhaustive and indeed it could not attempt to cover all the effects of the Bologna process in France in the space provided. What I will do therefore is to concentrate on a couple of aspects of particular significance and complexity in France: the introduction of the Master's degree in the universities and the relevant differences between the universities and the *Grandes Ecoles* or *Grands Etablissements* (GEs).

Structure of French higher education

However, before looking at that perhaps a quick reminder of the structure of French HE itself. Broadly speaking, the system is characterised by a division between the universities on the one hand and the GEs on the other. One of the essential differences between the two types of institution is that the universities must conform to national decrees and directives on education as defined by the French Ministry of Education, whereas the GEs have a much greater degree of autonomy over their curricula and programmes, even if many of them are governed by other ministries or indeed professional bodies.

In essence, this means that the Ministry of Education is free to set the Bologna agenda for the universities in France whereas the GEs are pretty much free to adopt its principles or not as they see fit. Another important feature of the universities is that, traditionally, entrance to degree programmes only becomes selective at third-cycle level. We shall see that these realities are reflected in the way in which the process has been integrated into French higher education.

To start with the universities, in the pre-Bologna period the classic pathway was:

- First cycle: a short cycle of two years leading to the first degree, the *DEUG/DEUST*
- Second cycle: a third year leading to the *Licence* (Bachelor's), a fourth year leading to the *Maîtrise*
- Third cycle: *DEA* (academic graduate degree) or *DESS* (professionally oriented graduate degree)
- Doctorate

Bologna implementation

In 2002, under the instructions of the Ministry of Education, the universities began implementing the aims of the

Bologna process, each according to their own schedule and timetable. Given the complexity of the system as described above (and this is a simplified version), it would probably be safe to say that the setting up of the 3-5-8, or LMD as the cycles are called in France, was and is the most complex of the Bologna aims to realise. Given that the system has changed from 2+1+1+1 to 3+2 in a very short period of time one can readily imagine the enormous consequences this has had and will have on the intellectual and academic content of the different degree programmes. Today, this is probably the area where most work remains to be done. It is therefore no small credit to the universities that by and large they have set up the 3-5-8 formula or will have it in place for 2005/2006. However, in true French tradition the introduction of the new structure did cause, if not quite a revolution, then a murmur of passionate discontent among the student population.

Student concerns

In October/November of 2003 the student body, not happy to learn of the disappearance of the degrees that charac-

terised the university system as they knew it, decided to protest by going on strike. One of the things which most concerned them was the fact that, as the *Maîtrise* or fourth year of study had been part of the second cycle before Bologna, students could enter the fourth year of studies on a non-competitive basis once they had successfully completed the *Licence*. Now, with the new structure in place, selectivity would become the order of the day directly after the *Licence* (Bachelor). This, of course, entailed a radical change of mind-set for students in a country which has a long tradition of public service, with free access to education in a non-competitive environment being a central part of that tradition. Students were not happy either about the disappearance of the first cycle *DEUG/DEUST*.

And finally, they were also concerned that ECTS would encourage what they saw as unhealthy competition between the universities as the credit system would allow them to move freely from one university to another 'shopping' for their degree and obliging the universities to compete for students.

In order to allay the fears of the student population, it was decided that the simplest thing to do was to introduce the new structure alongside the old one rather than as a substitute to it. In essence, this means that the universities have managed to put the Bologna structures in place while reassuring students that older, national options are still available to them. Simple? Not really. Creative? Most certainly. I would imagine that over the next few years, this will gradually fall away as the old degrees become naturally less attractive to a student population desirous of recognition within a European system. So who said you can't keep all of the people happy all of the time?

GEs

With regard to the GEs the situation is at the same time simpler and more complex. It is simpler because these schools have a great deal of autonomy over their curricula and programmes. Most of them function independently of the Ministry of Education, though many of them are regulated by the professions in engineering, business, etc. Their independence from the Ministry means that they are free to implement whatever measures they wish to as they see fit. In this way, many of the measures contained in the Bologna process such as ECTS, quality

assurance, mobility, etc, have already been in place for a number of years and in some cases as far back as 1999. A large majority of these schools have also organised their academic year in semesters thus facilitating mobility both in and out. However, the situation is more complex for the GEs, in that very few (if any) of them have adopted the 'L' part of the LMD, ie they do not deliver a Bachelor's degree. This is because entrance to these schools is highly selective and candidates to the schools typically spend one to two years in special schools preparing for the entrance exams. They therefore enter the schools having completed two years' post-secondary but without having specialised in the chosen fields which would make it impossible for the GEs to grant them a Bachelor's degree the following year.


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Paradoxically, a student who fails to enter a GE (and this is not a rarity given the small numbers accepted) can enter university at third-year level, having gained credit for the two years spent at *prépa* school studying for the competitive entrance exam of the chosen GE. In the case of other schools like Sciences Po, students who enter at undergraduate level either do one year's preparation outside the school or enter it directly after finishing secondary school but in either case they receive their first degree after five years bringing them up to Master's level. In essence, this means that the GEs deliver Master's degrees to students who have completed five years of study, in keeping with the principles of Bologna. However, these students do not receive an undergraduate degree which is in contradiction with Bologna. It is worth mentioning that within France this is not seen as being problematic. The jury is still out on how the GEs will decide on this in the future but if they do decide to deliver an undergraduate degree this will entail vast changes not only in their own structures and way of thinking but also throughout French post-secondary education starting

with the famous (or perhaps infamous) preparatory schools which students typically attend before sitting the competitive entrance exams to the GEs. There is, however, a possible way forward on this which, to my mind, is the most likely. In the case of just about all the GEs, students can also be admitted by competitive exam on completion of a first degree elsewhere. They then spend a further two years in the GE and graduate with a Master's. If this were to become more generalised then the problem of harmonisation with Bologna simply wouldn't arise. Added to that, and as a direct consequence of it, the GEs would undoubtedly greatly increase their visibility as top-ranking graduate schools on an international scene.

There are many and varied reasons why the GEs have not decided to deliver Bachelor's degrees to date which correspond to deep-rooted cultural values on higher education which cannot, and indeed I would argue should not, change overnight. However, that question is not the subject of this article.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Bologna process entails huge changes for higher education in France. Response has included imaginative and complex solutions which have allowed the aims of the process to be widely implemented in a surprisingly short period of time. I suspect the transition will continue to be relatively smooth even if Rome (and I suppose the same is true for Bologna) wasn't built in a day and a great deal of imagination and creative thinking will still be needed to address the remaining questions; thankfully these are not qualities the French tend to be short of. 

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The author expresses her thanks to: Anne de Blinieres – Université Paris Dauphine, Olivier Chiche Portiche – Edufrance, Beverley Delsinne – Institut National des Télécommunications, Anne-Marie Mallet – Université René Descartes, Paris 5, and Sophie Beroud – Université de Lyon 2