

Session 8: Workshop 3

Title: The *Bologna Declaration* on the European higher education arena

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Chair: Professor Robert Boucher, Vice-Chancellor, University of Sheffield UK

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Synopsis

Dr Haug described the *Bologna Declaration*, explaining what it consisted of, why it was necessary and how it would be implemented. He sought to impress upon the group that it is not an EU directive, imposed from above, but an arrangement that has been subscribed to on a voluntary basis. He hoped that the Declaration, whilst not imposing uniformity, will make the European institutions more competitive in attracting students and meeting the requirements of employers.

Presentation

Background and Significance of the Bologna Declaration

The *Bologna Declaration* is not just a political statement but a common action programme. There is an incredible diversity within the European education system; there are, for instance, thousands of differently named degrees, which makes the higher education arena very confusing. The Bologna Declaration is an attempt to create some sort of order; and the Higher Education ministers of 29 countries signed it in 1999.

What are the core elements of the declaration?

- A clear common goal to create by 2010 a European space for higher education
- A clear set of objectives:
 - to create a common framework of qualifications
 - to introduce undergraduate/postgraduate levels in all countries
 - to introduce a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) that would ensure compatibility and embrace life-long learning activities
- The creation of a European dimension in quality assurance. (At present it is difficult to make comparisons and gauge trustworthiness.)
- Elimination of remaining obstacles to the free mobility of students and teachers

It is not a legally binding treaty but a commitment to convergent reforms in 29 European countries. It was a commitment taken by the signatory countries to change their own systems (in partnership with the higher education sector). It was not imposed from above/piloted by the EU. It is hoped that the pressure for change will come from the process itself. The education systems in all European countries are

facing the same challenges. The Declaration is an attempt to search for a common European answer to common European problems. It is not anti-diversity and understands that countries have their own reasons for moving towards a common goal.

Composition of Signatories = EU + Transition Countries + Switzerland (with others waiting in the wings)

Why was it needed?

- It was a response to lessons learnt from the past, in which the same problems were encountered again and again (the Erasmus programme highlighted some of these problems)
- Education systems are entering new phases in which it is necessary to change some of the structures on a voluntary basis
- There is a growing tension between national systems and the internationalisation of activities and courses. Degrees need to be recognised internationally if they are to be marketable
- There is a need to be able to compare the performance of universities, so many of which give access to the same labour market. (The Italian universities, for instance, were finding it difficult to compete and this heightened their awareness that change was necessary.)
- Diminishing attractiveness of some national systems to students from other world regions was of great concern.

What should the next steps be?

- 1 The development of a coherent qualification framework, ideally along the following lines:

	60-129 ECTS = Certificate/Diploma
1 st Degree	180- ECTS = diverse Bachelor Degrees
	Or 240 ECTS = Advanced Bachelor Degree (60 credits per full academic year)
Postgraduate	<60 ECTS = Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma
	60-120 ECTS = MA/MSc
	not credit rated = Doctorate/PhD

The aim would be to create a more compatible system, making the degree system easier to understand and more "user-friendly" for students.)

- 2 Quality assurance – it is not the aim of the declaration to create a new European quality assurance agency but rather to work towards “meta accreditation” through the national agencies that are already in place.

Discussion

Participants in this session were keen to tap into the speaker's encyclopaedic knowledge and had many questions to ask him. Indeed, the session only drew to an ultimate close because of time restrictions. The key discussion points have been brought together under the following questions/headings:

Will it involve extra bureaucracy?

Despite the problem of working from so many different starting points, one of the main concerns has been to avoid any increase in costly bureaucracy whether in terms of money or of staff time.

Will it limit universities' academic freedom?

Whilst credits are a useful tool they are not the "be all and end all". Great care will be taken not to create a situation in which the credit system becomes a "strait-jacket" depriving universities of the freedom to design their own courses.

What will be the quality assurance mechanisms?

There are various mechanisms, in different countries, including:

- national quality assessment agencies attached to governments
- independent bodies established along disciplinary lines
- leaving quality assessment in the hands of the university and next to it an accreditation system
- following the German system in which a single body controls the use of the quality systems through the accreditation of accreditation systems

There are, of course, huge differences in the quality of students entering the system from different secondary education systems but this need not, and does not, stand in the way of the aims of the *Bologna Declaration*.

How comfortably does the impetus for mainstream change co-exist alongside national diversity?

- The Declaration is far from against diversity but believes that the will for mainstream change is evident in the responsiveness of universities to the need to put students first
- To a large extent the mainstream is being defined by competition. This was not so apparent in the past, when universities were largely protected by the nation and were not affected by what happened in the rest of the world. For the first time in the history of some universities, however, they are now faced with the reality that they will have to compete for students not only nationally but also internationally. Therefore the mainstream becomes the capacity to respond to change and competition.
- *Re* the question of differing languages: the Declaration is not against the continuing diversity of languages in the higher education arena, but the reality is that many European universities are now developing courses in English. There is also a similar movement towards strong European degrees being taught in English. In Germany, for example, many degrees are taught in English in the first and sometimes second year before reverting to the *lingua franca* in the third year - purely in order to make the courses more accessible/attractive to non-German students.

Is there a Commonwealth project with similar aims and objectives to the Bologna Declaration?

The simple answer appeared to be "no", but the evidence from around the world suggests that other countries (some of which are in the Commonwealth) are keenly interested in it. For instance:

- there has been considerable international (e.g. Latin American) interest in the European Credit Transfer System
- there has also been interest shown in the Erasmus project in the Asia Pacific - particularly for its value in facilitating co-operation between universities
- a number of other countries (such as Cyprus, Croatia, Turkey, and Yugoslavia) are eager to sign up to the Declaration.

During the construction of the Declaration were the opinions of industry and professionals sought?

- Yes, the writers tried to involve professional bodies and received a large amount of support from industry. (Engineering is a particularly good example of where industry would welcome aid in comparing vastly different degrees.)
- It became clear that multinationals are no longer satisfied with the products of "localised" education systems.
- Whilst state examinations will continue to exist, graduates may well encounter an increasing requirement to satisfy additional employers'/professional body examinations in order to gain employment.

Is this part of a general movement to provide machinery for the world-wide ranking of universities?

No, the Declaration is careful to avoid ranking as an issue. There is no ranking mechanism and it would not be trustworthy if there were. How would it be possible, for instance, accurately to compare the merits of an open university course against the traditional model? Moreover, given the diversity of languages, who would have the ability to check accurately?

What is meant by the 3-5-8 catchword?

Although not emphasised in the Bologna Declaration, in practice many systems are moving towards the 3-5-8 system of 3 years for a bachelor's degree, 5 for a bachelor's and master's, and 8 including master's and doctorate.

Recommendations for the ACU

1. There was general agreement amongst the group that more easily accessible, detailed information about what courses are offered where in the European higher education sector would be of great value. It is clear that bigger and better on-line course finders are required - and that there is an opportunity here for the ACU to increase both the depth and breadth of its present course finder to embrace not

only the Commonwealth but also the European higher education providers. Such a facility to search and compare courses on the web would be welcomed by all. Moreover, the profile of the current course finder needs to be raised, as there were many present at this session who were unaware of its existence.

2. There was a suggestion that the ACU could orchestrate a similar “Commonwealth Declaration” and become involved in university/course accreditation. (*Note: While the possibility of devising a "Charter" for Commonwealth universities is currently under consideration, ACU has always distanced itself from any involvement with accreditation. Ed.*)