

The Bologna Process and the development of the European Higher Education: quality, employability and social issues

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Introduction

The UNICA Student conference in Rome in September 2010, gathered students from all over Europe to discuss about some controversial issues related to the Bologna Process and the development of the European Higher Education Area, focusing on issues such as on quality, employability and social issues. The participants' purpose was to examine all the main topics of Bologna Process without any bias since most times the opinions on the different issues are in some ways quite rhetorical or repetitive.

The aim of the UNICA Student Conference 2010 in Rome was to give to the students the opportunity to interact with each other discussing on major issues that concern Europe's future and the aim of the students who participated in the Bologna Process Forum was to seize this opportunity hoping that their recommendations will find their way and position to the future directions of the EHEA.

1. The current status of the EHEA

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched along with the Bologna Process' decade anniversary, in March 2010, during the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference. The EHEA has been the main objective of the Bologna Process since its inception in 1999 and was meant to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. Between 1999 –2010, all the efforts of the Bologna Process members aimed at creating the European Higher Education Area were implemented and the EHEA became reality with the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of March, 2010. However, at this same event, the ministers of education established the next decade will target to consolidating the EHEA in light of the fact that many goals are far to be reached (EHEA, 2010). In addition, after the launch of the Bologna Forum, EHEA is no longer merely a regional phenomenon since it is starting to enlarge its influence well beyond European borders.

Needless to say, if Europe is not to come out harmed from the global competition in both the education and research / innovation fields, this crucial sector of the economy and society needs in-depth restructuring and modernisation. The 'EU2020' Strategy, the successor to the Lisbon Strategy, highlights education as a key policy area where collaboration between the EU and the member states can deliver positive results for jobs and growth. In this framework, higher education has an important role to play. At the same time, the strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training ('ET 2020'), adopted by the European Council in May 2009, focuses on the need to promote the modernisation agenda for higher education and to improve the quality and efficiency of education and training. Certainly, this is built on earlier work. More specifically, in 2006, the European Commission identified nine key challenges for modernisation of higher education in its 'Delivering on the Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation' Communication.

The main areas for reform identified in the agenda are:

- a) **Curricula**: the three-cycle system (Bachelor-Master-Doctorate), competence-based learning, flexible learning paths, recognition, mobility;
- b) **Governance**: University autonomy, strategic partnerships, including enterprises, quality assurance;
- c) **Funding**: diversified sources of University income better linked to performance, promoting equity, access and efficiency, including the possible role of tuition fees, grants and loans. (ec.europa, 2010)

2. The successes and shortcomings of the Bologna process

2.1. Positive and Negative Aspects of the Bologna Process

The student discussion led to a clear identification of some positive and some negative perspectives of the Bologna Process. The Process was literally put on trial with on one side the prosecutor and on the other side the defendant: this setting helped the students to better express their positions and thoughts.

Regarding the positive aspects of the Bologna Process, the first that can be mentioned is the fact that it created a unified system for mobility. Secondly, it helped Universities to enhance the quality of education, with the means of good practices and evaluation. It also encouraged the fusion of soft skills in the programmes. What is more, Bologna system contributed to multiculturalism and exchange of ideas in the

academic field. Additionally, it made the universities engage in a proactive competition and increased the freedom of students, while introducing the concept of the social dimension. Generally, Bologna Process promotes the modernisation of national education systems giving at the same time the opportunity to the nation-states to have common goals.

On the other hand, Bologna Process has some negative aspects that have to be considered. To begin with, some governments abuse the Bologna system for other national level reforms instead of implementing it in the right way. Moreover, the promise to undergraduates for employability after obtaining a Bachelor degree has not been materialised yet: in practice today many employers refuse to value the Bachelor degree as adequate certificate of employable graduates. Another problem which is being faced is that everything has already been decided by the nation-states that have originally signed the Process, therefore the new members have to accept the already settled decisions. Furthermore, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ECTS may be seen as challenging the autonomy of universities, while contradictions are observed among the policies applied by different countries. The procedure is heavily bureaucratic with quality assurance contributing to this direction. The top-down implementation is another important issue and the system in general can be characterised as complicated. The transition between the old and the new system is problematic, as the comparison between the old and new degrees has not been fully accomplished, yet. The generated competition is destructive rather than productive, and there is a significant mismatch between the Bologna Process politics and the politics of immigration.

2.2. Implementation of the Bologna Process: problems and solutions

As far as the implementation of the Bologna Process is concerned, firstly the need for practices different from the already existing, regarding the regulation and control of the progress of implementing the Process in each nation-state, was remarked. It was stated that the implementation of the Bologna system in many countries is slow or sometimes static. Thus, stricter control should be applied in cases of apparent lack of governmental will, but not in cases of financial barriers. The Bologna stocktaking system was regarded as one of the most powerful means to ensure the full commitment of national authorities and it was suggested to make it binding for them.

The fact that the European states do not keep pace with each other towards that direction generates serious complications to both students' and graduates' lives as well as the European labour market and economy, which is also affected by the "brain drain" problem that still exists, threatening the density of Europe in highly qualified graduates.

Moreover, special rules about the students that graduated during the years of implementing the new system should be formed, since they are affected adversely as regards their employability. Those students entered the tertiary education with different expectations about the opportunities they were going to have after graduation and they ended up with significantly divergent conditions. Many of those students inevitably prolong their study period if they are willing to continue with their studies at a higher level (Master, PhD). As a case in point can be referred the example of engineering first degrees that were obtained after five years of full-time studies, in contrast with the degrees that required only four years of study. The graduates of the former degree with the old system were able to directly move on PhD level studies, whereas with the new system they are required to first enter the Master level program, for which only one or two courses of their undergraduate studies are recognised. In connection with this particular theme the state of art of European qualification framework (EQF, 2008) was investigated. Seen that the EQF is due to become a comprehensive framework including the different levels of education, the participants stressed the opportunity to include also the qualification issued before the starting of Bologna Process. In this way the ones bearing former qualification should be better protected from discrimination.

The last topic that was discussed as regards the implementation of the Bologna Process was the requisite of broader information to students, academics and employers about the results of the implementation of the Process and about the new system itself. Many problems have been encountered due to the lack of adequate information for the changes that Bologna Process introduced to higher education, including feelings of fear and hostile mood in many cases. Thus, seminars relevant to the higher education, supported by the teams of Bologna Experts of each nation-state, should be organised more frequently and with more targeted audience, coming from the academic field and the industry sector. Many and many students miss lot of opportunities just for the simple fact they are not even aware that they are enrolled in a Programme inside the EHEA.

3. Access to Education and the Social Dimension

The second topic that was discussed related to accessibility to education issues, giving emphasis to the social dimension of this aspect. The first idea related to the social dimension of education pertains to the accessibility to education by people of any social status. It was stressed that people from all social classes should have access to university-level studies and the Bologna Process should contribute to this direction by undertaking leading initiatives. Further, it was stated that, although student fees are not directly related to the Bologna Process, the Process is still used by some parties to justify the rise of student fees, something which according to the students' opinion should also not happen. Besides, it was remarked that student fees are an obstacle towards providing accessibility to all social groups. On the other hand, many academic institutions are facing serious budget problems as a consequence of the global economic crisis and these aspects were taken into due account. Public expenditure in higher education field should be assigned to the institutions by financing directly students with scholarships or analogous measures.

The discussions acknowledged that often students from other parts of the world may face difficulties in accessing the European Higher Education Area. Students suggest that the Bologna system should take the initiative on this matter and promote non-EU students access to mobility Programmes by simplifying the student visa procedures. Another aspect which needs reconsideration is the number of quota for the students' enrolment in the universities of the EU countries, to give them more opportunities to access European higher education.

Thirdly, there is strong agreement on the need for easier access to higher education for disabled people. Universities all over Europe should promote access to disabled people. Moreover, disabled people should become involved in discussions on issues that concern them, something which could be achieved by constituting organisations and arranging forums for this purpose. In addition to all the foregoing, people with all kinds of disabilities, such as wheelchair bound persons, those with visual or hearing impairments and people with mental disabilities, should be taken into account.

As regards social benefits of higher education – such as discounts on transportation, accommodation, cultural events and health care – they are developed by the countries in order to support financially and enrich the cultural background of the today's youth, that is, the society of tomorrow. However, in many cases those

benefits are also promoted by the countries in order to decrease the effect of opportunity costs of working and earning a regular income, that come together with the students moving to a place for study purposes. The potential problem with these encouragement policies, though, is that they make higher education attractive even to those who are less interested in obtaining knowledge and skills, but would like to benefit from the various complementary advantages of being a student, i.e. social benefits attract also those who are not interested in studying, but in 'being a student'. One possible solution is to introduce age-related benefits, so that the youth would still grow interest in cultural activities, but at the same time higher education would not be translated into ways of getting a cheap health insurance or travel cards.

4. Degree structure and employability

Regarding employability in Europe, students consented to the fact that this matter should be stimulated by the Bologna Process in the coming years, as currently the employability aspect is degrading compared with the development and implementation of other aspects within the Bologna system. What is more, the necessity of more practical skills to be included as part of the University studies was brought into prominence.

To a large extent, different states have different demands on the labour market. As a consequence, in order to increase employability, the Bologna Process reform can facilitate equalisation of subject related degrees in different states – taking into account, of course, detailed quality criteria, so that holders of all those degrees will have equal job opportunities throughout Europe. Labour markets in different states can not be adjusted, and hence types of degrees for common majors have to become conformable to each other from the beginning. After the student centered learning approach was officially launched in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve final communiqué in 2009, the Bologna Process offers space for further improvements with regard to the building of higher education Programmes. This task may be considered a Copernican revolution for universities because it implies to strike a balance between transmission of knowledge and skills, when previously in most cases little or even no attention was paid to practical education.

According to students' opinion, the problem of employability needs to be tackled at three separate levels in order to assure adequate improvements in this direction; those levels would be the institutional, the national and the European level.

At the institutional level, the changes that should be applied in order for employability to become promoted are the following. To begin with, curricula can be adjusted according to labour market needs or according to the current needs of research and innovation. Employability is not the only goal of higher education. Students should think of studying both as a means to contribute to the society and to have a stable job, and as a means of simply becoming educated. Furthermore, nowadays, there is a significant disproportion between the number of job positions offered in the labour market and the number of qualified persons seeking that kind of jobs.

Curricula development should be promoted, with full stakeholder involvement, according to current needs of both labour market and society in general, providing at the same time the necessary quality assurance for the university level studies. Modern world is evolving and at the same time labour market demands are changing fast as well. Thus, the EHEA should focus on improving personal skills and providing intercultural education to students, so that they can adapt easily in the changing environment and be able to succeed in whichever EU-country they chose to work in during their life. In the light of lifelong learning it is more important to offer to students strategies and ways to update their own education, rather than spend all efforts in simple knowledge transfer.

According to the framework that the Bologna Process established, Bachelor degree holders should have knowledge of the basics of their field of study and some more specialised knowledge. Those who further continue to a master level program should be specialised in depth at a certain major. But when it comes to how the employers perceive this status regarding graduates who had never been involved in the labour market before, it makes no significant difference for them if the graduates are bachelor or master degree holders. In fact, the practical skills are gained when the graduate is getting trained while they practice their profession. As degrees are structured at the moment, after graduation students can not function in the labour market immediately, because they lack hard skills and practice. As a result, practical skills should be incorporated in the 2-cycle system including mandatory internships for one semester. Further, universities in general should start seeking a match

between curricula and employers' needs, whilst both sides should try to cooperate more efficiently.

At a national / institutional level, in order for employability to be increased, quota of students being accepted in higher education institutions should be dependent on a constant monitoring of the labour market, either at a national or institutional level, under the supervision of the governments. Furthermore, at a national level, quality assurance should be guaranteed in order to obtain a degree. For example, many students who obtain a degree in Eastern Europe cannot work utilising their degrees / diplomas in other states, because their degrees are not recognised by all the states. National governments should provide an adequate quality assurance system, to increase the transparency in systems in different countries, and therefore to encourage the mobility between states.

At a European level, a common base and definition of concepts throughout Europe about the ECTS system, the duration of studies, and the curriculum of the degrees are required. First of all, the ECTS system and the 3-cycle system should be implemented in every Bologna Process signatory country. Besides, the amount of credits should reflect the amount of study load. Also, many countries still use a combined system which decreases the possibility of mobility during the studies, and after graduation it decreases the employability as well.

Moreover, for the purpose of promoting employability at a European level, diplomas should state if the study is country specific or not. In the future, both the widespread differences in work load and time devoted for lectures that are observed today among several European universities and cases of disparate correspondence between work load and ECTS credits for similar courses among different universities should be eliminated. The creation of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education should be seen as an important opportunity to set down consistent evaluation methods and standards commonly welcomed by universities in order to measure students' workload. In addition, a credit system common between the nations-states for the evaluation of the importance of each course should be created in time to come. Apart from the above, a significantly crucial issue is that the duration of studies for each cycle should be suitable for each subject of studies and not necessarily e.g. three years for all Bachelor degrees.

5. Conclusions and Concrete Recommendations

The establishment of modernised higher educational systems, which guarantee a reliable, meritocratic, flexible and transparent manner the different functions of a university, while promoting academic freedom, autonomy, quality and excellence is essential. Students who participated in the UNICA 2010 Student Conference recommend to the Rectors and the European Commission the following actions:

1. More information should be communicated to students and institutional staff about the results of the implementation of the Bologna Process and the system itself.
2. Institutions should find ways to take into account the students' opinion via feedbacks from students that assess the correspondence between the ECTS credits and the workload / learning outcomes of the courses.
3. States should further take into account the assessment given by stock-takings on the levels of implementation of the different aspects of the Bologna Process.
4. Encourage the European Commission to provide access to mobility Programmes (such as the LLP Programme Erasmus), to students from non-EU countries which are parties of the Bologna Process, and to ask European countries to facilitate the visa procedures of non-EU students coming from these countries.
5. Institutions should promote the access of minorities to university-level studies, including them in the decision-making processes.
6. Institutions should be urged to clearly define the learning outcomes of the study programs.
7. The 3-cycle system should be subject-related and not country-related, with equal standards for each subject (e.g. engineering, medicine), instead of length varying from country to country.
8. The diploma-supplement should be standardised for all states and be free of charge, whilst being transparent to the labour market.
9. More practical skills should be included as a part of the university studies, such as optional internships.

6. List of References

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