

Bologna Seminar

Bologna 2020

Unlocking Europe's potential - Contributing to a better world

Ghent, 19-20 May 2008

'Bologna post 2010 - the EU perspective'

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be invited to speak at the first Bologna 'post-2010' event.

Post-2010 is 'in the air'. In Brussels, we are grappling with the 'post-2010' perspective for education and the Lisbon Strategy. In Paris, Unesco is preparing to renew its global strategy on higher education. No doubt other organisations are doing the same. To no surprise, all actors have set a rendezvous for 2009. Whether in Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve, Strasbourg, Bucharest or Paris, the choices we make now will determine Europe's trajectory in the challenging decades ahead.

Our reflection, in Brussels, is well underway. It will culminate in a year-end Communication on an education and training strategy for all levels, including higher education. Our current strategy, Education

and Training 2010, strongly supports Bologna, as you know. We have put the Bologna reforms at the top of the modernisation agenda for universities.

At this early stage, I would like to share some ideas to nourish our common debate. They focus on three objectives, which I would define as Bologna's 'core business', now and in times ahead.

- Qualifications for the future
- Global attractiveness
- Mobility for all.

But first, a few words on what has made the Bologna process so successful.

Bologna, the success of a shared agenda

In my view, we can thank the fact that we had a shared agenda that did it. There was a common sense of urgency back in 1999; there is a common sense of urgency today, that Europe should get its act together and make much better use of its potential.

The Bologna process coincided with other wake-up calls. I already mentioned the Lisbon Strategy, launched in 2000. I would add the PISA survey, published the year after.

This sense of urgency was translated into key common objectives - three-cycle structure, quality and recognition - and a light, but effective, way of keeping track.

The common objectives and light monitoring appealed to a wide constituency of universities, students, social partners and other stakeholders. This constituency contributed to the governance of the Bologna process, alongside the governments who carry ultimate responsibility for higher education systems. The European Commission joined Bologna in 2001, together with the students.

We should keep in mind these success factors - the shared agenda, the light structures and including stakeholders – when considering where we go next.

Let me turn now to what could be Bologna's core business in the next decade: qualifications for the future, global attractiveness and mobility for all.

I will start with the heart of the matter: qualifications.

Qualifications for the future

Bologna has done a good job in putting the structures and frameworks in place - the three cycles, the many quality and recognition initiatives.

Having established the framework, it is now time to examine the content. Are the qualifications we provide good enough? Are they relevant for the triple objective of university education - training people for high-level jobs, stimulating personal development and preparing for active citizenship?

At this point, I should say that we know that stakeholders feel uncomfortable with the emphasis on the labour market dimension of education. I will not apologize for that, because the link between higher education, creativity, innovation and employability is essential.

In rising to the dual challenge of keeping abreast of the knowledge society and defeating unemployment, we have to examine the mismatch between skills available and skills required.

But in fact, our work revolves around all three dimensions. And we do not overlook what education achieves in other fields, for example in promoting inter-cultural dialogue and understanding.

With their eyes on the employment needs of the future, European leaders at the European Summit in March invited the Commission to assess skills needs. The Commission has been asked "to present a comprehensive assessment of future skills requirements in Europe up

to 2020, taking account of technological change and ageing populations, and to propose steps to anticipate future needs".

For Bologna, this is an opportunity for sectoral involvement. Subject areas – law, for example, or medicine, nursing or music – could reflect on their contribution to the qualifications of the future, in consultation with experts, alumni and employers. Sectoral qualifications frameworks might emerge, inspired by the Tuning project approach to learning outcomes and competences.

This sectoral approach may mean less European work but more local reforms. It could also strengthen the links between education and research, between the European Research Area and the European Area for Higher Education. It would certainly mean more university-enterprise cooperation, as foreseen by the EIT, the new European Institute for Innovation and Technology.

Attractiveness

Despite the 4000+ higher education institutions in the wider Europe, our populations are still relatively under-qualified. Not enough of our talented young people enter universities; not enough adults have even seen a university from the inside.

Only 23% of the EU working-age population has achieved tertiary education compared to 39% in the US. Student enrolment rates are 25% lower than in the US [57 versus 82%].

This is a scandal for such a rich continent. It is a waste of individual talent and of human resources for our economies. It means our citizens have fewer opportunities for personal development and active citizenship.

We attract many students from other continents, but we are not using our full potential as a global player in advanced training. This in turn affects our societies and economies.

How can we make higher education more attractive for our citizens and for students and scholars from other continents? How can we make universities more exciting places to study and work? How can they become centres for lifelong learning? Or will new providers step into a gap in the market?

The Bologna frameworks are part of the answer, as they make the learning offer more transparent and comparable. But universities also need more autonomy to carry out their mission and manage their resources more efficiently. Research shows a positive correlation between autonomy, performance and better use of resources.

More and better resources are certainly needed. Let me recall the Commission's view that within the EU we should aim "... to devote at least 2% of GDP (including public and private funding) to a modernised higher education sector".

The March European Summit concluded that "universities should be allowed to develop partnerships with the business community so as to benefit from complementary private sector funding". As you know, the Commission has launched a University-Business Forum and we support such partnerships through Erasmus. The private sector also includes households. In my view, the controversial student fee issue should be discussed openly, without taboos.

To attract international interest, I believe more universities could promote themselves more proactively, for example, putting their course catalogues on the web, using the ECTS label template.

Mobility for all

Erasmus mobility is certainly a European success story - growing from a modest 3.000 students in 1987,¹ to the current situation where almost 160.000 students participate every year. Five years ago, we celebrated one million Erasmus students. We aim to celebrate three million by 2012.

¹ In fact, 3244...

Erasmus is still growing. The new EU Member States have increased their figures by 10%. Erasmus mobility from candidate country Turkey grew by 56%. The UK figures are going up again after some years of decline. However, in other countries, growth is slowing, or even decreasing. The overall growth rate was only 3% last year, compared to 7% in earlier years.

Some people blame the Bologna reforms – "Bologna Squeeze", it is called. Some fear that overloaded short programmes of study would encourage students to stay home, study hard and graduate quickly instead of risking a stay abroad. That universities would prefer to receive fee-paying students from outside Europe, instead of non-fee-paying Erasmus students.

We will examine all these factors and see how to accommodate them in our programmes. I am open to suggestions on how Erasmus could be more flexible, now and in future. Maybe we should give students a "rucksack", with mobility credits which they can spread over three cycles or concentrate in one?

There is also non-Erasmus mobility, often for longer periods of study or entire degree programmes. Both combined may help us reach some 10 % of university graduates.

That would be an impressive figure, but it is not enough. If mobility is a 'raison-d'être' for Bologna and EU involvement in higher education, if it brings all the benefits we say it does for individuals and society, we should be able to do better than that.

The Commission has therefore asked a group of High level experts to examine how we can substantially increase mobility, not only for students but also for young artists, entrepreneurs and adult learners. How can we break through the glass ceiling and make mobility more attractive? We need bold measures and original ideas. I will name a few.

In time, all students should have the opportunity to study or work on a placement in another country. All degree programmes - bachelor, master and doctoral level - should include a 'mobility window' as an integral and recognised part of studies.

As a first step, it may be useful to set ourselves a common objective, as was done in 1999. I know that individual institutions, countries and regions have set mobility targets which go way beyond 10% of graduates. For Europe as a continent, setting a target of 15% of graduates by 2015 would not be over-ambitious, in my view. It would certainly focus attention on mobility.

We could also think of more generous and more accessible student support. Better and more Erasmus grants are one solution on which the budgetary authority, Council and Parliament, have to decide.

Student loans are another option. The Commission and the European Investment Bank are looking into ways of setting up student loan facilities to widen access and favour mobility. Several countries and regions in Europe are already experimenting with such support.

We should not forget teaching staff mobility. Erasmus supports around 25.000 short-term assignments each year. But long-term assignments remain problematic, for the well-known reasons of pensions and social security. Portability of pension rights would boost staff mobility, just as portability of grants would for students and young researchers.

A new Commission Communication on "Researchers Passports" will address this, as well as the necessity for universities to recruit staff internationally, in line with the Code of Conduct for researcher recruitment.

Conclusion

To conclude, these are the three objectives I wanted to share with you: qualifications for the future, attractiveness of our institutions and mobility for all.

It remains to be seen how these objectives would translate into activities at European level. They would probably require more monitoring and less intervention. The centre of attention would shift to the national and local level - and such a shift would make sense, now that the European frameworks are in place.

Further reflection will make the picture clearer. In any event, I hope the EU perspective on the crucial decade to come gives you food for thought for the discussions ahead.

Thank you.