

The Bologna Process, from 2010 to 2020

*by Mr François Biltgen,
Minister for Culture, Higher Education and Research
Minister for Labour and Employment
Luxembourg*

After hardly ten years of existence the Bologna Process is a young child with a long history behind it. With the young child it shares the latter's capricious mood, the winding path towards maturity and also the exuberance at the astoundingly rapid achievements. The Bologna Process has rallied round its objectives the academic community, the student body as well as the political decision makers and it has reached out towards the business community and the trade unions. It has become a major factor influencing the life of the institutions and the policy decisions at a European as well as at a national level. It has become a source of both envy and attraction among countries that are outside its geographical scope. To some it looks even more successful from the outside than from the inside.

The Bologna Process has put higher education back on the political agenda from which it had been so conspicuously absent throughout most of the 1980ies and for much of the better half of the 1990ies. The most remarkable achievement of the Bologna Process therefore is its existence and its continuing existence.

Besides, if we further look at its strengths, among them is the fact that it has succeeded in formulating a set of common objectives and in making sure that the participating countries strive towards the achievement of these objectives by gently pressurizing them into doing so through reporting at ministerial meetings. All this has been done and all the while the trap of bureaucratization has been ingenuously avoided.

The Bologna Process is a young child, but it is also a child of the 1990ies. What is often forgotten is that the very first idea that European higher education needed overhauling was conceived of at a meeting of prime ministers from the European Union with their counterparts from the South East Pacific rim at the very beginning of the 1990ies. What struck them was that the flow of students from Asia and Latin America was no longer towards Europe but rather towards the US. In the following years a major report commissioned by the then French President François Mitterrand and written by the French intellectual Jacques Attali stated those objectives that were to lead to the Sorbonne Declaration and then in the following year to the Bologna Declaration of 1999. What was needed, according to the report, was a harmonized European system of higher education based on undergraduate and postgraduate levels, if it were to be competitive as a system vis-à-vis the one of the United States and it if it were to attract foreign students to Europe. A system that was to be at once attractive and competitive and in which student mobility was both an educational means and a separate objective, these were the underlying principles that in the following years were developed into operational targets and whose scope was considerably widened. Tools to make the systems compatible like ECTS or the Qualifications Framework have been developed and partially implemented while at the same time new objectives like the social dimension of higher education have been added to the initial paradigms. The commitment to the quality of higher education has underpinned the process from its very inception. The increasing momentum of the process has also been accompanied by an ever larger participation and has thus become a truly pan-European process.

So the Bologna Process has established itself as a forum for discussion, as a collegial form of cooperation where commitments are made and abided by, as an agora that leads to making European systems of higher education compatible within their respective diversities. However, it is still a young child and, as we all know, the transition into adolescence can be tricky.

The change that the Bologna Process has brought about has not yet reached all the levels of the system and at least in my country is not yet fully understood by society.

Employability comes to mind in this context and for a minister, who, next to higher education, also has labour and employment as a portfolio, this topic is of particular concern. Seen from the perspective of the institutions of higher education this involves the teaching and learning of generic skills and competencies like analytical skills, communication skills as well as the capacity to reason at a level of abstraction and at a recent seminar the Scottish authorities have shared their experiences in this area with us. The balance between the teaching and learning of knowledge on the one hand and the acquisition of transferable skills on the other hand is a delicate one. Not only does it raise a question as to the relationship between the depth of knowledge and the ensuing accurate mastery of skills and not only does it mean restructuring whole curricula, it also has a direct impact on the way the scholar or teacher perceives his/her role which can no longer be compared to the one in which the teacher merely acts as a lecturer. The life of the university department is changed because of this new paradigm. This will require further development.

Considered from the perspective of the labour market, employability also entails a rethinking on the employers' side, be they private or public ones. We need to realize that at least on Continental Europe the full significance of bachelor degrees is not yet fully understood. The prevailing expectation still is that a specific diploma prepares for a specific job and that the longer the study programme the better the preparation for the job. This is short sighted. In a changing economic environment the degree holder must be capable of summoning knowledge and skills that make it possible for him to adapt to manifold situations. Today's "Fachidiot" (only the German language comes up with this concept) is tomorrow's unemployed. But businesspeople must be open to this perspective and especially smaller and medium sized enterprises still have a long way to go. A realization that a great many jobs are generated in the small business and voluntary

sectors has led to the tailoring of appropriate degree programmes. It is essential that degrees testify to abilities and capacities that go beyond the immediate needs and at the same time degrees do not lead to unemployment. Any employability measure will have failed if it does not lead to employment.

The Bologna Process in its puberty will have to further care about the structural reforms that it has set out to do. It will have to fully implement the decisions that have been taken over the last decade or so. However, in order to become fully mature at the age of 18 or so it will also have to realize that the world has changed beyond recognition since the 1990ies and that therefore yesterday's answers must be set against a new background.

This is the reason why we have gathered here today and tomorrow. The institutions have played a prominent role in the Bologna Process. It is therefore the institutions that should influence the future debates. From the political side, I would like to stress two trends that to my mind will call for new responses. They are not emerging trends, or possible future ones, they are the ones that influence my daily work: demographics and globalization.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Saying that Europe has become an ageing continent is stating the obvious. Yet an ageing population does not only strain the pension system and the health care system it also redefines the very mission of higher education. Traditionally university education develops knowledge and skills in the students so that the graduates are capable of making valuable contributions to the economy. A knowledge-based economy depends on the graduate's capacity to be creative and innovative, which, however, peaks at the age of 35 or so. The question then is how to make sure that people in employment retain their innovative capacity up to a later stage in their working lives. Lifelong learning is an answer, but we still need to further think as to how to implement it properly. Lifelong learning means that today's young generation

will have to study more and longer than the previous ones. Yet, long does not mean “longer during their youth”, but rather longer if we add up all the study periods. This is also one of the reasons why great care should be taken not to lengthen initial study periods and why well designed bachelor programmes are so important. For the institutions the challenge will be to cope with a student population whose make up is fundamentally different from today’s.

The demographic factor also means that we must fare better when it comes to widening access into higher education. We cannot avoid wasting human capital. You will bear with me when I refer to the specific Luxembourg situation. Luxembourg has seen a net increase of jobs over the last twenty years and the trend has been towards employment requiring tertiary level education. Today the percentage rate is at 56% for this type of job and this holds true for both the service and the industry sector. Yet a mere twenty-five percent of our school leavers at secondary school level go on to tertiary education. Economically speaking the country cannot afford this; in terms of job prospects for school leavers and in terms of personal fulfilment in later age it is unacceptable. So I know we must do better than this. At a European level I observe similar trends and Odile Quintin referred to them. Governments around Europe accept that higher education is a major driver of the global knowledge-based economy and that the quality of human resources is, in the long run, a major source of global competitiveness. A knowledge based economy requires an ever more sophisticated workforce; this in turn means that at least the first cycle of tertiary education will have to attract an ever increasing number of students. The bachelor degree will in the end become as “banal” (within inverted commas) as the secondary school leaving certificate (be it called baccalauréat or Abitur) became in the 20th century and as primary school education became in the nineteenth century. This will require not only a very considerable transformation and expansion of the existing post-secondary education, but also entirely new paradigms for the conduct, organisation, financing and leadership of higher

education. Our institutions will have to become equipped in order to be able to face this challenge.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Globalization is the second phenomenon that requires our attention. I would like to approach it from a neutral perspective, being fully aware of the fact that it is both the subject of celebration and criticism and realizing that times of globalization in history have always been prosperous times. Globalization for universities means the global context in which they have to operate and at the same time the globalization of some of their activities. It is worth pondering the various degrees of the global commitment of the higher education sector.

It is indeed important to stress that different activities in universities have different geographical frames of reference. Research – especially basic research – has to be globally competitive, especially in the hard sciences and in engineering. Undergraduate learning and teaching still tends to be nationally-oriented although cross-border provision and distance learning become more prevalent. Finally knowledge transfer activity tends to be regionally or even locally focused. Modern universities have thus become multi-functional, each function being conducted within a specific geographical frame of reference.

So far we have had no common response within the Bologna Process as to how to deal with this complexity, although the principle of university autonomy is advocated in this context. Even though not part of the overall Bologna Process framework, there has been a tendency across the Bologna Countries to reduce the direct level of management from the ministries. Granting greater “autonomy” to universities has been viewed as a necessary feature of developing a more flexible, dynamic and entrepreneurial higher education sector. This has been regarded as particularly appropriate for the development of leading research-intensive universities. This very statement shows that we are gradually moving towards a level of mission differentiation.

However, I do realize that following the Humboldt tradition of universities in Europe, there is hostility to the notion of “teaching-only” universities being bona fide universities at all. Once upon a time though universities existed to provide teaching and learning, and research was residual. Let us not forget what the land-grant universities in the US did for the development of the university sector as a whole and let us also bear in mind the role the “liberal arts” college plays in today’s American model. Today’s emphasis on research tends to lead to a situation in which world-class research is to be concentrated in a small minority of universities and the ranking of universities is a sign of this trend. Creating a competitive environment that encourages the evolution of world-class institutions is clearly an objective of the European Research Council, which aims to implement a peer review system that recognizes excellence and focuses resources accordingly. If that is the case, what explicit vision do we have to set out for the role of the remainder though they constitute the numerical majority? To regard them as merely “teaching only” is surely not good enough. They, too, need to be invested with the same elements of innovation, creativity and purpose. The Bologna Process must help bring about a strategic planning capacity to steer elements of the sector that are not driven by research selectivity.

Globalization also influences the very teaching mission of the universities and it does so in two ways. I have argued that the teaching mission of the university is still very much embedded in the framework of the nation-state. This phenomenon has lately been reinforced. In spite of a compatible system based on bachelor, master and PhD degrees across Europe, we witness a re-nationalisation of the systems. Student mobility has not advanced to an extent that those ministers who signed up to the Bologna Declaration in 1999 had hoped it would. It is true that the preservation of culture and of language is a critical function of higher education. Still, this does not mean that the university system of a particular nation state must primarily teach its prospective civil servants. This nineteenth century Humboldt ideal was also a means of reconstructing the Prussian State. Mobility must remain a cornerstone of the Bologna Process; this principle

holds true for student mobility as well as for academic mobility. What we need is a set of rules for immigration, social security and work permits that value academic mobility and distinguish it from classical labour mobility. Mobility policies must bring together political initiatives of this kind with a range of practical measures running from recognition through financing to receiving students at host institutions. Mobility also depends on multilingualism and knowledge of more than one foreign language must come to be seen as a generic competence. Foreign language proficiency is also a way of introducing what the Council of Europe calls “multiperspectivity” into higher education. Mobility policies thus help institutions play a role of social transformation rather than of social reproduction.

Clearly, the demands of research capacity and human capital development have created challenges of revenue and in turn a search for alternatives to public revenues. These developments have also focused attention on the cost effectiveness and efficiency of higher education. Future debates about the funding of higher education will continue to engage both the allocation of costs and also the legitimacy of those costs. At the same time there will continue to be pressures to find new revenues since in most countries tax revenues are already stretched. Certainly changes in tax policy encouraging private philanthropy would be a step forward. A diversification of funding mechanisms does not mean though that higher education ceases to be a public good. The responsibility of public authorities is not limited to providing direct funding. It includes laying down the rules under which alternative funding may be sought and provided.

Globalization also means that the increasing complexity of providers of higher education in the form of cross-national for profit organizations and the expansion of distance delivery has led to a new perspective. Even though this type of delivery is still small, a new language of macro-economics has gradually replaced the more vernacular language of higher education. The significance of this new language is the degree to which international trade organizations have attempted to reduce this

type of provision to a model of international trade. In this case the major concern of these negotiations is to remove impediments to commerce, but at the same time they raise questions about quality assurance, customer rights and transferability of courses and programmes. However, all efforts to manage international movements of students and of programmes will have to confront long established national differences. After all, the individuality of higher education systems gives added value to the student exchange. The Bologna Process must provide the framework within which viable structures for European higher education can be designed. The Bologna Process, therefore, must also act as a depository of the traditional, “universal” values of higher education.

Finally, when everything has been said and done institutions of higher education will still be institutions that harbour brain power, ambition and expertise. They are natural partners in economic development but also and perhaps more importantly major contributors to social cohesion. They have a convening power. They can bring people together from all sectors of society to address the issues of the present and the future. In this way universities become places where the future is created. In this way they add value of a kind that cannot be obtained elsewhere.

In this brief intervention I have happily relied on a number of contributions which I have asked a number of prominent people to make. Not all of them have managed to meet this deadline and submit a fully edited text. This will be done so in the weeks to come and a publication will be made available. Today’s conference will add further wisdom to these findings and will thus be an important stepping stone for the Leuven ministerial meeting in 2009.

My main plea for the future of the Bologna Process is that it will manage to find adequate, easy to understand responses to new challenges and to a changing environment and above all that it will manage to keep the energy it has thrived on so far alive.