

**New Perspectives for Master Study programmes in Europe
Implementing the second cycle of Bologna – A European success story?**

**Bologna Seminar hosted by the
German Rectors' Conference (HRK)
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Conference Conclusions and Recommendations*

Introduction

The conference examined the current state of second cycle master programmes and degrees around the European Higher Education Area. The principle aim was to assess how master study courses are being implemented around Europe following the major objectives being pursued during Bologna Process. Reforms have clearly been greatly affected by unforeseen developments at both national and global level, and in particular the impact of the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic downturn is yet to be fully known. Hence some of the ways in which the Master is now being developed and used could not have been predicted when the major commitments of the Bologna Declaration were made.

The 2009 European University Association (EUA) study, *Survey of Master Degrees in Europe*, provided a comprehensive source of background information, and indeed the main findings of this study were presented at the opening session of the conference. The study recognised that, "although Bologna is advancing successfully on a number of fronts, it still has some way to go". The report noted that a number of conditions need to be fulfilled before the master can be declared a truly European success story. Foremost among these is, "the acceptance of the Bologna Bachelor, on a pan-European basis, as a valid qualification and labour market entry point".

The Conference examined 5 major topics in working groups:

- The emerging Master market was the subject of discussion in the first group, and took as its starting point the reality that Master programmes have different aims and profiles to accommodate a wide range of individual, academic and labour market needs.
- The second working group focused on how universities assess applicants to find the most appropriate students for their Master programmes.
- Working group 3 examined issues of mobility at Master level, asking whether the master is particularly suited for international mobility, and how "brain circulation" between the European Higher Education Area and other parts of the world can better be fostered.
- The fourth workshop looked at the Master in the context of Lifelong Learning, asking what makes lifelong learning attractive.
- The fifth group analysed common features and similarities of European Master Programmes.

The following conclusions and recommendations draw on the discussions of all 5 working groups as well as those during the plenary sessions.

* We would like to thank Mr. David Crosier (Eurydice) for drafting the conference conclusions and recommendations.

Conclusions

There was agreement that the Bologna Process has brought about a great deal of significant and positive transformation. Common steps have helped to improve the quality of European higher education systems, making programmes and qualifications more readable and accessible. However, social and economic developments have also created new challenges for higher education systems. It is now imperative to address these challenges.

As far as structural reform is concerned, while the transition to the Bologna three cycle system has been largely successful in parts of Europe, there are countries where implementation began relatively late and where considerable work still needs to be done. Even in those countries where structural reforms are more established, some aspects of implementation now need to be reconsidered. In particular far more attention should be given to developing curricula with a learning outcomes orientation.

Master programmes do not exist in a vacuum, and the relationship with the first and third cycles is critical. Unless the first cycle fulfils its dual purpose of preparing students for the labour market as well as for further studies in the second cycle, the Master cannot develop as a more specialised and flexible programme building on the learning outcomes of the Bachelor. This, however, may explain why the Master is often consecutively designed. In turn, the third cycle needs to build on the learning outcomes of the Master. Thus three-cycle reforms have to be addressed as an integrated and coherent whole if the Bologna Process structural reforms are to succeed.

After more than a decade of Bologna reforms, a recognisable European Master is taking shape. There is great and increasing diversity of content in Master programmes, and this is entirely appropriate as knowledge becomes increasingly central to societies and economies. Moreover, even though there are considerable variations in the length of master programmes, dominant models are also emerging, and citizens and employers generally understand the Master qualification. Nevertheless, there is still much to be done for Master programmes to be readable and understandable to potential students, and for qualifications to be understood not only nationally but also internationally.

The Conference discussed different purposes and types of second cycle qualifications, and concluded that it is a serious mistake to think that countries and higher education institutions should make a choice between lifelong learning and internationalisation. This conclusion does not imply that all higher education institutions should try to fulfil all purposes. Rather, there should be space within higher education systems for institutions to focus on and develop their strengths. Moreover institutions that are serving the needs of local regions and populations should be recognised, valorised and rewarded as much as those that concentrate on attracting international students.

The Conference was asked to consider how Lifelong Learning provision at Master level could be made more attractive. The conclusion was that Lifelong Learning is already attractive, but that serious problems in its provision nevertheless persist. The most significant of these is that lifelong learning provision does not always reach the right target groups, and that the offer is generally insufficient particularly where it is most needed. Lifelong learning at Master level is also inadequately funded, and often perceived as a marginal rather than a mainstream mission of higher education institutions.

As far as internationalisation is concerned, it is clear that the Master cycle has specific potential to attract international students. This is a positive and essential aspect of reality in global knowledge societies, and thus vitally important for Europe. The Master degree also clearly offers enormous opportunities for Europe's students to be mobile. However, the opportunities offered by Bologna reforms for students to move from Bachelor

programmes in one country to Master programmes in another are not being fully exploited. While barriers to mobility should be removed, the most important action to stimulate mobility is awareness raising. Many students are simply not aware of the possibilities to study in other countries, and too few consider the range of possibilities that are open to them.

While it is important to increase the attractiveness of European higher education, European countries should not, however, think that international mobility can compensate for other weaknesses of their education systems. If human potential within European societies is being wasted through inappropriate educational provision, this waste carries an enormous cost. The talents of those from currently under-represented groups – such as those in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions - therefore need to be harnessed alongside efforts to recruit the brightest and the best from other countries.

Recommendations

The Conference had a specific eye to the 2012 Ministerial Conference in Bucharest. In this context, a number of messages were agreed upon for Europe's Ministers to consider. These messages are not, however, exclusively targeted to Ministers. They are also intended to stimulate debate among higher education institutions, students, and other stakeholders and citizens.

- 1) Ministers are asked to play their part in anticipating the major societal transformations that lie ahead in relation to demography and the development of knowledge societies. Foresight and planning are needed to respond to increasing societal demands, and to enable citizens to be fully equipped for the demands of future knowledge societies.
- 2) In order to plan more effectively, dialogue with all stakeholders needs to be intensified. In particular, employers should play a more important role in discussions of future higher education needs, including at the Master level, to meet a fast changing labour market.
- 3) The Master in Europe is characterised by a high and increasing degree of diversity of content. This trend should be maintained and developed. However, it is also important to ensure that the value of a Master degree is commonly recognised and understood.
- 4) Diversity of content also includes linguistic diversity. While the trend for more Master programmes to be offered in English is a positive phenomenon, cultural and linguistic diversity is also a feature of the attractiveness of the European higher education area. A balance therefore needs to be struck between these twin objectives.
- 5) Work on the development of the content of Master programmes should be increasingly undertaken across both academic and geographical borders. It should be done transparently, making use of the Bologna toolkit that is now in place. National Qualifications Frameworks, Diploma Supplements and ECTS should be used intelligently in an approach based on Learning Outcomes.
- 6) Countries should do much more to encourage students to study for a Master degree abroad, taking advantage of the three cycle structure that is now in place. This should not, however, be done at the expense of mobility opportunities in other cycles. Indeed first cycle Bachelor programmes should be more systematically designed with mobility windows.
- 7) Countries should also examine their practice with regard to the naming of Master degrees. This needs to be done with consideration of the inter-connected international academic and labour markets that need to understand the qualifications. The panoply of different names for the same or similar programmes can be reduced if countries take steps to eliminate unhelpful titles. Terms such as pre-master masters or post-master masters,

bachelor in masters or master in bachelors are indications either of conceptual confusion or of qualification structures that are inappropriate in the European Higher Education Area. They should therefore be abandoned.

8) The Conference strongly recommends that EUA's proposal for adopting a system of markers to indicate salient features of Master programmes should be followed up and used. This could be done with a view to adopting a set of «Salzburg principles» for the Masters.

9) The role of policy making in the future cannot be undertaken solely by legislation and decree. Policy frameworks are needed that provide flexibility for different institutions and actors. Thus ministers should consider their role to be setting a stable and long-term framework that encourages and values diverse provision and provides support. Incentives and enabling measures for higher education institutions are increasingly needed.

10) While being fully aware of the pressure on public funding at a time of economic crisis, the Conference participants are also convinced that investment in higher education is a major part of the solution to stimulate economic recovery. While diverse funding sources for Master provision should be explored, all Bologna cycles remain a public responsibility that require secure and sustainable public funding. This is particularly important if the shift towards essential, better-targeted and more appropriate lifelong learning provision is to take place.