

EUA Conference

Graz 2003

Theme 5

Pushing forward Bologna and Prague

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Almost all items covered by the Graz conference undertake to continue along the Sorbonne-Bologna-Salamanca-Prague lines. They do so by providing suggestions in order to improve the fine print of what is commonly known as the “Bologna concept”, and to enhance its implementation. This is also true for theme no. 5 of the agenda. It is based on the assumption that universities in principle accept the Bologna process. Accepting the process is politically inevitable since this is the key element of EUA’s Salamanca message, for instance, and since it is reasonable because the Bologna concept is valid in substance.

In fact, item no. 5 addresses the Bologna process most explicitly, trying to shed more light on it. It does so by taking on three central aspects of the Bologna process, i.e.: Bachelor/Master structure; ECTS; Social Dimension.

These headlines were rightly chosen because they indicate those areas and terms succinctly which are hotly debated. However, there is reason for caution. The debate on “Bologna tools” such as ECTS or bachelor/master/doctorate structure, often abbreviated to a 3 – 2 – 3 or a 4 – 1 – 3 debate, tends to push the essential question of the Bologna process into the background. This essential question is: what are the overriding and primary objectives of study programmes as learning experiences?

In contrast to these considerations concerned with learning objectives, most of the three aspects of the Bologna process mentioned above describe study programme tools or – at best – secondary aims of the Bologna process, not primary aims in terms of learning outcomes to be accomplished by these tools. In doing so, they indicate the major shortcoming of the key Bologna documents and, unfortunately, a great deal of the subsequent discussions. They strongly relate to tools, hence the six bullets mentioned in the Bologna Declaration plus the three added in the Prague Communiqué are highlighted a lot. Though this is done so rightly debated, conviction building and indeed trying to get the answers right will be in vain unless priority is given to a clear understanding of the overriding learning objectives of the process instead of concentrating on the mechanics only, although they are also important.

The verdict “in vain” may be applied in two directions.

Firstly, unless the learning objective is clearly stated and explicated at the onset there is no sense of direction as to applying the tools mentioned in the Bologna and Prague documents in a meaningful way, with any chance of coherence and of answering open questions by means of interpretation and interpolation.

Secondly, unless these objectives are stated clearly there will be no acceptance of the process by relevant stakeholders inside and outside universities.

Two suggestions should be drawn from this fact, one pertaining to politics and one to methodology of our discourse.

The political one is simple in principle: Graz, and Berlin afterwards, should strive to clearly indicate the primary goals of the process first, and only then list tools – or secondary aims – mentioned in the Bologna and Prague documents. This is the primary aspect of prioritising; it concerns structuring the Bologna concept with more precision.

In addition, there must be an indication as to how the tools suggested correlate to achieving the primary aims outlined first, and where aspirations and tools may conflict, and how conflicts between aspirations and tools may be solved or mitigated. In other words, targeting and balancing “Bologna” tools is the second sphere of prioritising to consider.

Thirdly, of course, there is the standard understanding of prioritisation in a procedural sense. This means indicating the sequence of achieving aims, employing suitable tools, and the entire question of transformation by phasing-out and phasing-in.

The methodology suggested for the debate at the Graz conference follows this very same line of reasoning, i.e. proceeding from objectives via tools towards correlation and implementation . It serves as basic orientation on the case and is an attempt to provide the debate with an elementary structure. It is not prescriptive nor does it exclude changing the suggested methodology, and of course it is open-minded as to answers suggested.

Having outlined the method of approach, let us translate this into practice in relation to the Bologna concepts, bearing in mind our task to indicate the way ahead for the academic and the political arenas, especially for the Berlin conference.

The general pattern of item no. 5 on the agenda may be seen as follows:

Survey of Topic and Approach

level 1/ substance:	primary aims – secondary aims – correlation of B.P. = tools of B.P. links, conflicts, → “quality” solutions → “quality”
level 2/ special focus:	specific action areas – 3 subitems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bachelor/Master-structure - Transparency, Recognition; ECTS - Higher Educ. Inst. and Students; Social Dimension
level 3/ process:	agenda to be derived: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - actors - addressees - communication lines - timing - phasing

When looking at level 1 mentioned above in the light of the Bologna Declaration and Prague Communiqué more closely, i.e.

- the substance of primary aims, then
- at the set of Bologna tools, and
- finally at correlation and conflict,

The Bologna Process (“B.P”) seems to read as follows:

Primary Aims of the Bologna Process (B.P.)

Items

Essence	Subitems
Academic Quality ⇒	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - excellence of research and teaching/learning → (expanding) knowledge - personal development
Meaningfulness to the individual (personal development) and to society → explicitly: Employability ⇒	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - transnational context - life-long, in dynamic environment - innovation and implementation → “knowledge society/economy” - social interactivity
Mobility ⇒	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in space: cultural competence - in time: life-long learning, learning to learn - flexibility: recognition of different national (incl. non-)academic learning experience
all items with special focus on:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - European Dimension - Enhancing Attractiveness

Questions: → interpretation, hierarchy?
→ correctness: (ir-)relevance, omissions?

Secondary Aims = Tools of the Bologna Process (B.P.)

Items, as listed in B.P. and P.C.:

- Adoption of a comparable and transparent system of degrees
- Two-tier structure (BA/MA)
- Implementation of a credit system (ECTS)
- Promotion of mobility
- Cooperation in quality assurance
- Promotion of the European dimension in higher education
- Lifelong learning
- Role of higher education institutions and students
- Attractiveness of the European higher education area
- Higher education as a public good/governmental responsibility

Questions:

→ in general:

- concept: understanding, (dis-)approval, fine-tuning of items
- status achieved
- enhancing implementation

→ in detail: see diagramme 3.1. – 3. (sub-topics)

Correlation (links, conflicts, solutions)

between 3 (or 5) primary aims \leftrightarrow 9 secondary aims = tools

Questions:

→ links: description of links; fitness for purpose;
required design and implementation

→ conflicts: identification; inevitability

→ solving
conflicts: priorities; compromise; remedies

When looking at level 2 mentioned above,
i. e.

- **specific action areas =**
workshop groups 1-3,

considering

- specific B. P. tools, and
- their correlation to B. P. objectives,

it may be suggested to consider the
following sub-items in more detail:

Sub-topic 1: Degree structures (BA/MA)

Subitems:

- a) The BA-MA structure and its characteristics:
 - definitions via
 - workload, learning outcomes, profile, levels of modules, quality;
 - without/or with standardized (core) European curricula?
 - ensure meaningfulness of bachelor degrees in their own right, not just as a stepping stone to masters level
 - ensure employability as an objective, and how to operationalize the objective (concepts; dialogues);
 - ensure real curricular changes instead of mere shortening of traditional programmes

b) Design of the master phase

- description of possible types:

topical: narrow specialization – acquisition of
a closely related field – acquistion
of a different field

purpose-oriented: academic, esp. as preparation for
doctorate – professional training –
hybrid academic/professional

additive: post-master master for further
qualification?

- access: entry requirements

Sub-topic 2: Transparency and Recognition/ECTS et al

Subitems

a) ECTS

- proper understanding; i.e.
standardized understanding (ECTS label)
moving towards accumulation
- towards implementation; i.e.
institution-wide policies; guidelines; legal instruments;
- quality control

b) Recognition, Transparency

- Diploma Supplement: meaning and public awareness
- developing quality labels (ECTS; Diploma Supplement)
- improving recognition tools and procedures
(e.g., coop. with ENIC/NARIC)
- the role of quality assurance instruments (accreditation;
evaluation)

Sub-topic 3: Higher Educ. Inst. and Students - Social Dimension

Subitems:

- a) access
 - social, incl. financial, barriers
 - flexible learning paths
 - mass higher education and excellence (elite)
- b) mobility
 - cost issues
 - recognition
- c) participation
- d) solidarity
 - cooperation and competition in HE
 - brain drain

Questions, pertaining to all sub-topics

→ in general:

- concept: understanding; (dis-)approval; fine-tuning
- status achieved
- implementation to advance

→ in particular:

applying B. P. tools (above)
for achieving B. P. prime objectives
(above)

Having addressed the issues at stake in their substance, finally there must be a clear message. The debate must outline an agenda to be derived from the substance of the above-mentioned issues raised and clarified. Hence the debate could and should culminate in the following layout:

Towards an Action Plan

- topic; (sub-)item considered
- status quo
- development suggested
- agenda/action
- addressee
- responsibility
- time frame

Ladies and gentlemen,
the issues at stake are complex and difficult, but the opportunity to shape European higher education is extremely challenging. We should not miss our chance. In order to make the best of the short time we are given structuring the debate as outlined may prove to be useful. However, this is a mere proposal, open to being discarded altogether, to changes and to amendments. The process and its success are in our hands.