

Three year view of issues raised by the Bologna Process

May 2009

By Sir Drummond Bone

A. Current Concerns and Immediate Issues

The Bologna Process now includes three cycles in HE in the EHEA (European Higher Education Area, covering some 46 countries). UK institutions still have some concerns over **second cycle provision (Masters level)** – particularly in medicine and in areas which offer an accelerated Masters programme (eg Engineering). These issues are often linked to different practices in professional accreditation. There has also been the perceived difference in the length of the UK masters (typically one calendar year) and that of most Continental Masters courses at two academic years. Recent research suggests however that the spread of second cycle qualifications across the EHEA is sufficiently diverse that an overly narrow interpretation of Bologna norms is unlikely. This does not mean that all employer markets will react in the same way to different kinds of qualifications. The recent study by the EUA (European Universities Association) calls for more flexible second cycle provision to accommodate employers' needs.

The **shortening of the first cycle (undergraduate provision)** in many Continental European countries has produced a perverse but real reaction in some overseas countries (eg USA and Canada), calling into question the appropriateness of a three-year degree for entry into Masters level study. Given their previous history of accepting English three-year degrees this is somewhat strange, but an issue nevertheless.

Typology and ranking – in Bologna jargon 'multidimensional transparency tools' – the development of these indicators needs to be carefully monitored to avoid bias and the danger of comparison on an unequal basis. There is a fear that as the EC is funding the preliminary work there could be political pressure on the process in a way that the Bologna process itself has largely avoided. Some EU countries believe that the two currently most used world-rankings favour English-speaking countries. Data collection and comparability is key.

There is still some way to go in the UK on **ECTS (European Credit Transfer System)** as a credit accumulation (as opposed to transfer) scheme, though there is less noise in the system about this than other issues. It clearly has data control issues. Scotland has a longer experience of ECTS than England, having introduced it as a transfer system some time ago.



The shortening of the first cycle (undergraduate provision) in many Continental European countries has produced a perverse but real reaction

The increasing emphasis **on internationalisation** underlines the need to take Europe (and Germany particularly) as serious competitors for overseas students, and also opens up the possibilities for further collaboration with European partners, a sometimes difficult balancing act. Underlying this are a number of **trade issues** - although the EHEA may look like a powerfully united block from the outside (it is perceived as such by ASEAN countries for example) the level of state subsidy to both overseas student recruitment and research varies widely from country to country, and is not in the UK's favour².

The first phase of Bologna is supposed to be completed by 2010. In reality the speed of implementation varies from country to country, but in the original EU states this target date is likely to be broadly met. In many ways the full implications of these reforms will only become evident as students begin to graduate from the new programmes in significant numbers, and the UK must keep this in mind. The next phase of the Bologna process is sketched to run until 2020, but the more immediate milestone is the next Ministerial meeting in 2012. For that the following issues have been highlighted by the Ministerial Communique following the recent meeting in Leuven³:

- **Equitable access** - 'each participating country will set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups'
- **Lifelong Learning** - 'life-long learning implies that qualifications may be obtained through flexible learning paths, including part-time studies, as well as work-based routes'.

[Both of the above are not new to the UK, but given demographic trends⁴ and the current economic situation, may become of ever more increasing importance, and now need to be seen in the context of Bologna. This is also true of -]

- **Employability** - 'we encourage work placements embedded in study programmes as well as on-the-job learning'
- **Student centred learning** - 'curricular reform will... be an ongoing process leading to high quality, flexible, and more individually tailored education paths'.
- **Funding** - increased emphasis on 'new and diversified funding sources and methods' is liable to make more visible the trade issues referred to above.
- **Internationalization** - is seen as key both through collaboration and competition.
- **Mobility** - of 'students, early stage researchers and staff' strengthens both research and education - the UK is currently particularly weak in outward student mobility (though data is not easy to come by on a generally compatible basis). A target of 20% of graduating students within the EHEA having studied abroad has been agreed for 2020.
- **University Autonomy** - while this may not seem an issue for the UK, the dependence on a regulated market for home students limiting the UK institutions' ability to raise money from fees could still be considered a future problem.



B. Are these issues being faced by UK institutions?

The second cycle issues are much debated, but the debate probably centres too much around a false idea of Bologna's prescriptiveness, and less around employer acceptability

and in some cases professional accreditation, which are the real issues. Flexibility will be the key over the next years. The QAA led a process in 2008-9 to certify that the Framework for HE qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland ensured the comparability and compatibility of HE qualifications here and elsewhere in Europe.

There still remains a battle to be won over **hours versus outcome** in student learning – the UK is not in a particularly strong position, since it seems to be arguing from a very *partis* position – with on the face of it less contact hours than most of its continental rivals⁵. While it may appear as if Bologna (as opposed to ECTS) has agreed that outcomes should be the leading principle, there is still considerable grass roots opposition to this position (possibly even in the UK amongst students or parents who pay). In North America the implications of this argument are only just beginning to be taken on board and are rather alarmingly not well understood, at least at grass roots level.

Ranking and typology will be a major factor in the next few years. Not many UK institutions are as of yet aware of what might be coming down the tunnel.

Equitable access has long been a concern of all UK institutions, as is **life-long learning** and **student-centred learning**.

The UK is further advanced than most in **diversifying funding**, which is not to say that more needs to be done – and there is considerable variation across Institutions.

ECTS – a lot of work remains to be done, and understanding is I estimate patchy at best.

Much of the remainder of the Bologna agenda over the next 4 years could be seen as a special case of **Internationalisation**. Mobility and internships are probably closely related, in that it will be at least as easy to promote outward mobility in the context of placements as in the straightforward academic context, which is hampered in England at least by the three-year degree, and by the fears over credit accumulation. The introduction of targets for outward mobility will be a real challenge to UK institutions. There will have to be new management structures to mentor and place both inward and outward internships, and indeed more rigorous monitoring of academic mobility than happens in many places at present. Schools and employers will have a role in persuading potential students and employees that overseas experience is beneficial, and that the way in which a University handles these opportunities should be a reason for choice.

Taken as a whole, Bologna has moved up the agenda of UK institutions in the last say 4 years – helped by the advent of the Europe Unit based in UUK, and by sites such as JISC's own⁶. But the extent to which its challenges are incorporated into University strategies varies enormously. Where there is no immediate financial upside (and indeed there are costs) these issues can be pushed to the back burner. This is true of Internationalisation in general, but of Bologna especially. Very few Institutions will have targets for Bologna goals, and particularly in the case of mobility that may well have to change.

C. Are User Expectations Currently Met?

i Student reaction to the April Ministerial meeting would suggest not. From their point of view the reforms have not sufficiently widened participation, and have not sufficiently opened up prospects of student mobility and an open market for employment. The 'social dimension' in short has taken second place to a process of structural reform. They are probably right, but that was probably a necessary first step in many countries.

ii So far as the Universities are concerned, it would very much depend in the UK on what these expectations were – in some cases being left alone seems to have been the

main hope if not the main expectation. Where forward thinking strategies are looking for more and different kinds of student mobility, a more flexible approach to the second cycle, a more international approach to life-long learning, more and continually rigorous TNE (transnational education – usually referring to modes other than the simple movement of a student from one country to another eg on-line or overseas campuses), more cooperation with continental Europe and a willingness to discuss just what ‘multi-dimensional transparency tools’ might reasonably be, it would be true to say that there remains some distance to travel.

D – Practical Implications for JISC.

1 Data handling will be crucial for much that is likely to evolve in the Bologna context:

1.i Progress through qualifications frameworks and the diploma supplement are perhaps the two most obvious examples. The European Qualifications Framework will be key to lifelong learning (see D.1.iv below), but its compatibility with the more specialised HE systems under the Bologna process is not yet clear. And many UK institutions have said that they have IT issues which prevent their easy compliance with the Diploma Supplement (the extra information over and above degree results which will be available to prospective employers detailing exactly what a student will have by way of knowledge and skills). Though a 2007 study by the Europe Unit showed more UK institutions offering Diploma Supplements than previously, the number as a whole was still low, and the recent stocktaking for the Bologna Process shows this as a ‘yellow’ risk for the UK⁷.

1.ii There will need to be a considerable upscaling of the systems used to track mobility – whether this is through ECTS or whether it is through the data banks necessary for internship matching.

1.iii Increased collaboration has to be managed, and if it is to be effective there has to be enough central understanding to ensure that synergies are exploited to the maximum. Recent research by DIUS⁸ suggests that at least in the research context this is currently very far from the case – and it is even less likely to be the case where teaching is concerned.

1.iv If life-long learning and flexible employer-led programmes are internationalised there will be another large demand for data. And the same is true for increased TNE and its associated quality control systems. If open access to course material becomes part of this not only will there be ICT delivery, but again information on availability will be crucial⁹.

1.v Even though the ranking and typology will be independently delivered (no matter what form it takes), Universities will have to model and manage their own input.

1.vi Last but not least, it is significant that of 5 points under paragraph 26 of the Ministerial Communique quoted from above in A, charging the BFUG (Bologna Follow-UP group) with specific tasks, 3 involve measurement directly, and the other 2 imply it (indicators for [student] mobility and social dimension in conjunction with their data collection; development of transparency mechanisms; network for better information and promotion of the Bologna Process outside the EHEA). Eurostat, Eurostudent and Eurydice will all be asked to contribute.

2 Involvement with Stakeholders

2.i JISC could be best involved by working with the sector, perhaps through or in close cooperation with the Europe Unit, to map out ways in which the managerial and administrative load of an increasingly complex educational (and research) environment could be lightened not only at Institutional centres, but particularly at the front end – namely the academics directly involved.

2.ii There are likely to be a menu of possibilities – what will definitely not be required is some one-size-fits-all for the Bologna element of Internationalization – large sector-spanning projects should at all costs be avoided.

2.iii JISC should also seek to work with the European Students Union and with the NUS to see what information would make mobility easier for students to contemplate. It would also be interesting to understand how employers across Europe could cooperate on information on internship and placement availability.

2.iv JISC's key stakeholders in the Bologna process development do not seem to me to be substantially different from its roles elsewhere – the academics and the students, the management of the sector, the UK government, the employers of the sector's students. Perhaps the difference is that those academics, students and employers specifically could come from anywhere within the EHEA, and in a genuinely open market could be in free-flow into and out of the systems with which JISC directly deals. This places a considerable emphasis on the compatibility and interactivity with other similar bodies across Europe, who in turn become stakeholders and for whom JISC is also a stakeholder. If this is a change of mind-set, it could be a considerable one. If there is not a pan-European body (at least with the scope of the EU) liaising with the BFUG on ICT, there clearly should be.



Summary

Bologna is entering a period of consolidation, but it is likely to be a period when considerably more change will affect the UK than has been the case hitherto as the process becomes 'real' in Continental Europe. Mobility targets, together with the UK governments own increasing concern with outward mobility, will affect us in the medium term. We should be well placed to deliver education in a student-centred and flexible manner, but must not be complacent in the face of modernising competition – and the same obviously holds true for the recruitment of non-EHEA students and staff. Information, easy of access, which allows Universities to manage their relationships with other Universities and with business across Europe, and which encourages students to seek out-of-home-country experience of learning or employment will be very important, as will be an understanding of the ways in which typologies and rankings affect an institution's standing and market attractiveness. In all of these JISC has a role to play, and just as the Bologna process has demonstrated the value of sector-led implementation, so JISC should follow its example by continuing to be pro-active but pragmatic, flexible, and aware both of what can be gained by scale and what can be lost by not considering the alternative gains of subsidiarity.

Drummond Bone

1 'Survey of Masters Degrees in Europe', <http://www.eua-be/eua-news/view-item/article/806>, 2009, EUA

2 'Internationalisation of UK HE: a Ten-Year View', report for DIUS, November 2008, Drummond Bone. See also: 'An Analysis of National and Institutional Approaches for Attracting international Students... in the United Kingdom and Selected European Countries', UK Europe and International Units, March 2009, Rosa Becker, Steve Woodfield et al; 'The Bologna Process and the UK's International Student Market', HEPI Report (Summary 36), May 2008, James Cemmell and Bahram Bekhradnia

3 Ministerial Communique, Leuven, April 2009, <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference>

4 'The Future Size and Shape of the Higher Education Sector in the UK...', Universities UK Report, February and July 2008, Nigel Brown, Brian Ramsden et al.

5 'The Academic Experience of Students in English Universities', 7 May 2009, HEPI. See also: 'Diversity in the Student Learning Experience and Time Devoted to Study: A Comparative Analysis of the UK and European Evidence', hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2009/cheri.htm, 2009, Open University Centre for Higher Education Research and Information.

6 jiscinfonet.ac.uk/bologna-process

7 <http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europeunit2/resources/E-07-07.pdf>

8 'International Research Collaboration in UK Higher Education Institutions', report for DIUS, 2008, Centre for Education and Inclusion Research and the Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University.

9 Open Education Content, paper for HEFCE learning and teaching committee, 6 June 2008, JISC. This paper has a sensitive approach to sector-wide approaches which would serve Bologna issues well.

