

Higher Education Institutions in the Bologna Process

Opening Speech

Stefan Delplace

Secretary General of EURASHE

Dear Mrs Glebova

Dear Rectors, Vice Rectors and colleagues in the Bologna process

It is with great pleasure that on my turn I am welcoming you to this joint initiative of EURASHE and the Association of non-state Russian universities, which represents your country in the Council of EURASHE.

In a few slides, on which I will be commenting rather discursively,

I am consecutively dealing with some essential aspects of what is commonly called Bologna, the original name for the HE reform process in Europe.

'Bologna' the common name for the HE reform process which started in 1988 (effectively in 1989) was from the outset styled as a voluntary process.

Countries that were willing to endorse the original (quite basic) aims of making European HE more transparent by harmonising their systems in order to allow for a greater mobility of students and academic staff, were invited to join for the benefits of the direct stakeholders, the universities, their staff and above all the student population.

Support mechanisms to underpin this had already been in place for quite some time, mainly through the E.U. education programmes (Erasmus, later Socrates, and now the LLL programme). For the countries outside the E.U. there was the Tempus programme, offering similar support on a smaller scale. The 'tools' that existed and which are still essential instruments for 'Bologna' were and are still ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, and the mobility grants.

Later and in a logical sequence, were added the European dimension, a concern for quality assurance, the qualifications frameworks, descriptors that would define the level of knowledge of a student at each stage (later called cycle) when reaching a qualification.

With the creation of the EHEA in 2010, after 10 years of Bologna, the protagonists (mainly Ministries and a few organisations like mine) judged

that they had managed to create a 'space' covering most if not the whole of Europe, and some would say going far beyond the area they had originally had in mind.

From the outside it does not really look as if it is completely voluntary, since in the end everyone felt they had to join, for fear of missing something essential, which is clearly a sign of its success. A frame was found to delimit the process, the only 'legal' criterion, if any, namely the countries had to be signatories of the Lisbon convention, an initiative of the Council of Europe, and UNESCO, pledging to recognize qualifications from other signatory countries, and of course also to make the 'Bologna action lines', which the ministers had jointly agreed upon, a reality in their own country.

There are 47 countries now, who applied and were judged to fulfil the criteria. The latest one joining was KZ, thus stretching the EHEA from the Atlantic ocean far into the East. Other 'partners' in the process are the EC (through its education programmes a main financing body), the Council of Europe, UNESCO all three official bodies, and also organisations representing the main stakeholders in the HE, that is the HEIs, the student body, the QA agencies, the academic world (all HE staff), and the employers.

The latter organisations feel increasingly the urge from governments and wider society to take a more active role, now that the legislation has been put in place, and the grassroots level has to tune up, in what is called the 'implementation phase of the process'.

In what I would call the 'foundation' stage of the process, the original 'Bologna' action lines received in turns, and also with varying degrees in the different countries, a particular focus.

Naturally, the concept of transparency and adoption of the two (later three-cycle system), and a credit transfer and accumulation system remained objectives to be primarily fulfilled.

Mobility: was a priority from the outset.

QA: as a basis for trust among stakeholders in the system

The European dimension ; appeared hard to define, but came to mean a mix of the aspects that made the process unique: institutional autonomy, a concern for quality, the social dimension, the involvement of all HE stakeholders.

Other 'action lines' came along , with the subsequent biannual Ministerial meetings, precisely under the pressures of the stakeholders in the

process, and also due to the increased attention from the world outside the EHEA, which came to realise that education was a factor to be counted with (and some would say became misused) in a globalised world.

My own organisation has always strongly advocated flexible arrangements to widen the range of participation in higher education, which became possible in the concept of lifelong learning, and is in line with the students' insistence on the 'social dimension' of higher education, and the Council of Europe's plea for a more inclusive society. Because of the ageing population of Western society, there was a concern in many countries, to have a more educated and employable population, at every stage of a person's working life.

It was also increasingly felt that the European model should be promoted to other regions in the world, as a separate entity from the national identities of the countries.

The priority "HE should be founded on state of the art research, shows the impact of the European Commission and of the EUA, the stakeholders organisation of the research universities.

As said before some new action lines showed clearly the mix of governments' and stakeholders' input, which is increasingly a hallmark of the EHEA, involving a variety of stakeholders, reflecting wider society, and in terms of methodology a combination of legislative and administrative measures and grassroots initiatives.

The higher education reform process spanning two decades, there are clearly two distinct stages, a first one while putting the system in place and a decade starting as from now, in which universities and other centres of learning have the responsibility of materialising the reform on an institutional level.

The European Commission, has been and remains a continuous factor of impact on the process, adding the socio-economic agenda, on top of the original 'pure' objectives of facilitating mobility and harmonising the educational structures. The new keywords highlight the ambitions of the EU, involving higher education also as a competitive force. Further there is the wish to make vocational (higher) education link to the HE, through various processes, and also on how to relate to the neighbouring countries of the European Union.

The objectives of the European Commission are mainly achieved through financing, in support of action lines for mobility, for the

cooperation 'education-enterprises, the modernisation of universities, and for propagating the concept of lifelong learning.

Interestingly, for about five years now, there is a growing interest from the other regions in the world, where similar developments to the Bologna Process are taking place, for example in the area of QA, but also in other priorities of the process, such as the QF.

What still makes the Bologna process unique is the mix of the different areas, where all seems to be linked, and finally goes back to the same original 10 priorities. The response to the aspirations from the other regions in the world is met by the biannual 'Bologna Policy Forum' to which are invited the countries that have expressed a more than superficial interest in the process, or on the basis of bilateral agreements with member countries in the EHEA. It is a forum where Bologna achievements are discussed from the angle of potential cooperation with other regions in the world, and with the intention to learn from each other. However this cannot be separated from the trend in European countries to export their knowledge and expertise in the field of education and to increase their competition with other education providers in the US, Australia etc. The same twofold mission is apparent in the workings of the International Openness working group of the Bologna Follow up Group, which at the same time tries to coordinate the information to the outside world of what is happening in the EHEA, and also tries to promote the EHEA worldwide, with varying success, as individual countries continue to serve their own national interests.

The creation of the EHEA, the successor of Bologna, resulted from the latest Ministerial meeting in Belgium in 2009, under the BENELUX Secretariat, whose Head was Marlies Leegwater, a speaker reflecting the governments' position in our seminar. The Communiqué of the Ministers gathering in Leuven (BE), provided an outline for the coming decade, building upon the achievements of the previous decade.

I will only go briefly over some of these topics, which are a selection from the Communiqué. They are about the realisation of the main initial objectives of the BP, and also reflect the particularities of the process. Education as a responsibility of all stakeholders, the mobility of students in the broadest sense, including fresh graduates, the three-cycle system (with the addition of the doctoral degree) and the instruments developed

to support the process, some of which will be further developed by colleagues, the national Qualifications Frameworks, the foundation of the European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAR), etc.

The creation of the EHEA had to take account of the different stages of implementation of the Process, due to countries stepping in at a later stage and also the specific country and cultural context.

Monitoring of the process happened through the biannual stocktaking of the state of implementation in the different countries, an external assessment after the first period of 10 years, collection of data by the European Commission, and similar initiatives.

It has already been mentioned, further progress mainly will or has to come from the universities/HE institutions, in closer cooperation with the stakeholders.

The priorities laid out for the next decade clearly show the shift in paradigm, reaching out to stakeholders and society at large. A focus on equal opportunities, a new learning environment, employability and the learning process.

With the doctoral level came a focus on research, another pillar of the mission of HEIs. The third pillar, service to community is more difficult to fit in, as in this the diversified picture of the institutions has a great impact. The cultural diversification of Europe, is mostly recognized as an asset, but poses problems as well, especially when it comes to offering your programmes to international students. There is an overall benchmark for mobility, going beyond the traditional boundaries, with a different content, and aiming much higher than some countries are used to, as the mobility figures differ greatly.

Coming now to the context of this seminar, I have to stress that it came at the request of our Russian members, and is meant to be an exchange of views & experience, from each partner, dealing with issues on the level of the institutions, and stressing the support that can be expected from a stakeholders organization like EURASHE.

The topics that will be presented by the various speakers from both the Russian federation and the West of Europe are well defined in the

programme, and we left it to our distinguished speakers to highlight those issues that they thought were relevant for this audience.

We hope your contributions as an audience of main stakeholders will turn this into an interactive exercise, and as said earlier, in an exchange of opinions and experience between East and West, all partners and allies in the same process.

Thank you

Stefan Delplace