

# **Clean your house before you invite guests**

**How to make the Bologna Process survive the financial crisis**

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## **Introduction**

In 1999, 29 European countries decided to cooperate in higher education. They signed the so called Bologna Declaration in order to create an European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This EHEA should be realized this year, in 2010. By now Bologna has 47 participants, working on the implementation of the Bologna tools, i.e. the three-cycle structure, consisting of Bachelor, Master and PhD, the European Credit System and a National Qualification Framework. However, although many results have been achieved, we are still far away from a true European Higher Education Area.

In this paper I argument that to survive the current economic crisis, the Bologna process needs careful attention. This fairly expensive, highly complex and long term process, with results that are difficult to measure, risks losing its political momentum when financial resources are scarce and governments are in panic. Also, the Bologna process has already been under discussion lately (see for example NRC-Next (1 April 2010) and Westerheijden et al 2009), making it more difficult to regenerate in case of losing its momentum. Therefore it is important to anticipate on the impact of the financial crisis.

In this paper I construct a survival strategy for the Bologna process, based on a personal experience in cooperation between European higher educational institutions. This strategy should not just safeguard Bologna's political momentum but simultaneously generate a strong basis that accelerates the realization of the EHEA by the time the financial panic has settled. The paper starts with a short explanation of the Bologna process and its current state, including the Bologna 2020 agenda's that have been proposed by several agencies. Then I describe how a network of European Life Sciences Universities struggled with its Bologna minded goals and what we can learn from this. Confronting the Bologna process with these lessons results in a proposal on how Bologna can be managed during the crisis.

## **The Bologna Declaration: past, present and future**

### The Past

As mentioned in the introduction, originally 29 countries signed the Bologna Declaration, aiming to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. After Kazakhstan joined this March, the Bologna process currently consists of 47 participating countries. All these countries committed themselves voluntarily to the Bologna goals. The main objectives that were determined for the EHEA over the last decade are the following.

The EHEA should:

- 1) shape the citizens Europe needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, i.e. critically and independently thinking individuals
- 2) attract students from outside the EU
- 3) facilitate student (and graduate) mobility through compatibility of degrees and credit systems, for example through the Bachelor/Master system (Ba/Ma) and the European Credit System (ECTS)
- 4) generate higher educational quality through comparison and cooperation, among others by accreditation agencies and stimulating a National Qualifications Framework
- 5) stimulate social inclusion through student-centred learning and flexible learning paths

These aims are often summarized in compatibility, comparability and attractiveness of European higher education. (Sursock & Smidt 2010 and official website Bologna Process)

### The Present

This year is 2010, which means that the EHEA should be a reality by now. When looking superficially the creation of the EHEA seems to be very advanced. According to the Trends 2010 report, 95% of the universities has the three cycle, or Bachelor/Master/PhD, structure implemented and 90% uses ECTS as a credit system. This should make it easier for students to exchange and for institutions to cooperate, thereby bringing the aims of the EHEA closer. However, when looking behind the figures it turns out to be very different.

Having the Ba/Ma system implemented often means old programs under a new name, squeezed into three or two years or cut into pieces of that same amount. This makes European degrees incompatible, as a Polish student demonstrates in a Dutch newspaper; she had to put enormous effort in having her Polish Bachelor recognized in the UK (NRC-next 1 April 2010). ECTS can be measured in lecture hours, working hours or learning outcome. This is incomparable and therefore universities do frequently not accept other universities' credits. According to the EUA Trends 2010 report, the percentage of universities having problems with accepting other universities' credits rose to 54% as compared to 50% in 2003. (Sursock & Smidt 2010)

Whereas these new structures should facilitate student mobility, in relative figures mobility has hardly grown. In absolute numbers student mobility rose with 38% since 1999, but taking into account the growing student body in many countries, relatively the growth was only 4%. In addition, there is a strong east-to-west pattern. Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and

Turkey are substantial sending countries, whereas Sweden, Spain and the UK are receivers. (Westerheijden et al 2009)

When considering one of the main aims of the EHEA, student centered learning, we are even further away from our destination. The shift to student centered learning should make it easier for students from all kinds of background to enter university education. It should facilitate international exchange and it would help create the citizens Europe needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, i.e. self responsible and active citizens, instead of passive consumers. Yet the implementation of student centered learning is different than implementing Ba/Ma and ECTS, although these systems are facilitators for student-centered learning. The latter two are technical, administrative changes, which have shown to be already very difficult. Student centered learning demands besides modularized education and transferable credits and degrees, a culture shift in education. According to the EUA it involves '*a shift in focus from the teacher and what is taught to the learner and what is learned*'. The learning is about '*deeper understanding and critical thinking*' and '*focused on outcomes rather than inputs*' (Sursock & Smidt 2010: 31). This idea of learning opposes some of the teaching models that are used in many European countries, especially Eastern Europe. In addition, it is a concept that can be interpreted in many different ways and its implementation is difficult to measure. This is why the EUA Trends 2010 report cannot give a clear account on the status nor on how to take action. One of the things that is stressed by the EUA in their Trends 2010 report is that in order to facilitate student centered learning, the student-staff ratio should decrease and university buildings need to facilitate room for group work and individual learning. This asks for a large amount of financial resources in many Bologna countries. (Sursock & Smidt 2010)

### The Future

The Magazine, the EU's writing on education and training, writes the following about education during the crisis: '*Education and training institutions across the EU are battling their way through the economic crisis. With public finances strained and companies cutting back on recruitment, prospects look as bleak for today's school leavers as for tomorrow's economic recovery. But vision and sound policy may yet turn the current economic turmoil into an opportunity.*' (The Magazine 2009:5)

This statement is followed by an article on how education should be a 'springboard for European recovery'. Its main recommendations are: focus on employee education, since less jobs means more time for study, and create small training programs focused on professional

outcome, so that students can enter the market more rapidly and prepared. The financial responses to the crisis are mixed in the different countries. According to this article, France, Germany, Norway, Spain and the UK affirmed they will invest extra in higher education, yet mainly in university buildings and infrastructure. Only Spain claims to reserve €85 million for European integration of their education. However, this article was produced before the latest crisis and cutback announcements in Spain. According to The Magazine, Italy, Greece and the Netherlands express strong concerns about the future of their financing. (The Magazine 2009)

Since 2010 is Bologna's implementation year and much work is still to be done, several bodies involved with the Bologna process have assessed the current state of affairs and developed an agenda for 2020. Interestingly, especially in light of the article from The Magazine cited above, these agenda's hardly touch upon the current economic crisis.

The EUA trends 2010 report only mentions the issue of funding a couple of times, for example: *'In view of the current economic crisis, it is of equal importance to secure investment in the knowledge economy through sustained funding of education and research in order to reach the set goals and to avoid harming the education and prospects of the current student cohorts'* (Sursock & Smidt 2010: 97). They propose a four-point agenda for the coming decade:

- framing European education in a broad vision of our future society and its citizens
- continue working on educational quality
- European cooperation in education outside Europe
- strengthening the links between the EHEA and the ERA (European Research Area) in order to create a European Knowledge Area. (Sursock & Smidt 2010)

The ministers of education of the countries participating in Bologna emphasized in their 2009 and 2010 meeting, that *'higher education is a public responsibility. We commit ourselves, notwithstanding these difficult economic times, to ensuring that higher education institutions have the necessary resources within a framework established and overseen by public authorities.'* (Ministers of Education 2010: 2) They come up with the following priorities for the next decade:

- striving for excellence through a focus on quality
- the social dimension (equal access for all citizens)
- the implementation of life-long learning

- the implementation of student-centered learning
- employability of graduates
- integration of education and research
- openness to global cooperation
- mobility of students and staff
- improving the data-collection to monitor the EHEA development
- altering funding strategies where necessary. (Ministers of Education 2009)

An independent assessment of the progress of the Bologna process that was issued by the European Commission and executed in 2008/2009, stressed the following key challenges for the next years:

- keep up the political momentum for the Bologna Process
- provide the complex issues on the Bologna agenda, like the social dimension, with clear action lines
- provide newcomers with sufficient funding even when from outside the EU, in order to avoid large differentiation in implementation level, as is currently the case
- focus on the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework to make sure that teachers and learners support the process. (Westerheijden et al 2009)

According to The Magazine, education can be a major driver for economic recovery. Yet only when the impacts of the crisis and how education relates to this are thoroughly considered. The proposed agendas do not point in that direction. The agenda of the Ministers of Education simply stresses all Bologna aims from the last decade, without prioritizing. Both the EUA and the Ministers of Education agendas are highly ambitious with a strong focus on enlarged cooperation, e.g. worldwide cooperation or cooperation with different fields like the European Research Area. Such agendas do not demonstrate any sensitivity to the impacts of the crisis. Also, the independent assessment agency stresses the importance of supplying new (even non-EU) members with sufficient resources. This might be difficult in a financial crisis. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to guide Bologna through the crisis in a stimulating way; in the following chapters I explain how.

## **A network struggling for Bologna**

In this paragraph I share a personal experience in European cooperation in Higher Education. It is important to stress that it is the description of a personal experience, based on my own impressions and the many formal and informal conversations I had with involved board and staff members. It is not a case study performed by experienced researchers but an account from a student having her first experiences in international organizational life. This implies one should not take it factually or purely objective. However, it does reveal some lessons for the Bologna process in the current crisis.

### The Euroleague for Life Sciences

The Euroleague for Life Sciences (ELLS) is a cooperation between several life sciences universities in Europe. Its main aims are to share experiences and help each other improve educational quality, as well as to create joint programs, including summer schools and joint masters. In the year 2003 the network did not function as hoped for due to several reasons, roughly located at two levels. A large part of the problems was going on at the level of the home institutions of the participating universities: in the Netherlands a large reorganization was going on making staff positions insecure, the Danish university faced a forced merger with another university and in several countries changing legislation and funding strategies forced universities to alter their internal structures. At several universities the benefits of ELLS as compared to the costs were under heavy discussion. A factor contributing to the doubts was the university of Aberdeen leaving the network, partly because of this cost-benefit analysis. This was a heavy loss for the network, damaging the self-perception of being a network of 'leading Life Sciences universities'. Why would one not want to be a member of a network of leading universities?

In addition to these internal troubles and doubts at the level of the home institutions, there were problems at the network level. After several years of cooperation there was still only one summer school and another upcoming. Creating joint masters turned out to be a tiring process, delayed by home country legislation as well as troublesome cooperation between the different countries. Many countries did legally not yet allow for a joint master, employee workload was heavy and cultural differences were large. Also, people changing positions implied that every ELLS meeting at least someone attended for the first time.

Trying to resolve these issues turned out to be a strenuous and very slow process that made people lose their interest and turn away from the network. The ELLS Board, consisting of the rectors of the different universities, was thus far unable to resolve the problems and generate a more positive spirit among the staff. And then another problem appeared: funding. Up till then the network had been able to receive some funding from the EU to finance the summer schools. However, EU was changing its interest towards its new member states in Eastern Europe. In order to retain the funding and keep ELLS on the map as a network of 'leading Life Sciences Universities', ELLS had to reposition itself. The board proposed to extend the network towards Eastern Europe. This extension-project gave the network something concrete to work on, a possibility to keep the funding, become a bigger network and compensate for the loss of the UK. In addition, some of the rectors had befriended rectors at Eastern European universities which they would like to have involved. Eastern Europe was hot! Nobody, except the Student Association, asked the question if the network was ready for such an extension.

In approaching the two selected Eastern European universities, ELLS presented itself as a flourishing network of leading life sciences universities, strongly cooperating in order to benchmark for better education and create international opportunities for their (and external) students through summer schools and joint masters. They were even cooperating with American universities! This is what the two new universities expected when receiving the ELLS delegation at their institutions. For both parties, this meeting became a disappointment. For the old ELLS members, the two Eastern European universities turned out to have no Bachelor/Master structure implemented, no English courses or programs and no student participation in their decision-making process, which were all clear demands for ELLS participation and characteristics identified for being a leading university. For the new members, there was no flourishing network and there were no programs they could easily join into, yet there was a heavy meeting structure with demotivated staff, a slow decision-making process and large costs involved. The old members had hoped to save their network by extending it; yet only the network's outside appearance was saved. Within the network it became even more difficult to realize concrete results due to the extra problems the Eastern European universities were facing. The new members had hoped to resolve their lagging behind in the Bologna Process by joining a flourishing network; yet there was no quick-fix available within ELLS. Overall, instead of boasting the network, the extension brought about a major set-back, causing ELLS to have grown only marginally ever since.

### What can we learn?

According to the European University Association, what happened to ELLS fits in the time frame. Ten years ago higher educational institutions '*used to boast about the number of their cooperation agreements*' (Sursock & Smidt 2010: 21). It was a strategic way to impress students and compete with other universities. Nowadays, '*more attention is being paid to quality rather than quantity of partnerships*' (Sursock & Smidt 2010: 21). Although being part of a network was and is a status marker, currently universities pay more attention to whom they want to cooperate with and why.

Nevertheless, this story beholds more than just a demonstration of the time frame. It shows the danger of extending a network during a crisis. ELLS was in an internal crisis but instead of resolving its personal and mutual issues, it focused outward, hoping to find the solution elsewhere. The lesson Bologna can learn from this is what I summarize in the following metaphor: clean your house before you invite guests. There are several dangers in not cleaning your house before inviting guests. Firstly, trying to hide your mess from the guests risks its enlargement, since instead of paying proper attention to it the problems are ignored. In addition, the presence of the guests, bringing their own belongings, might enlarge the mess even more. As a consequence, it becomes harder to see which part of the mess is yours and which is somebody else's, making it easier to avoid taking responsibility for your part of the mess. This may even result in projecting the solution to your mess on your guests, hoping they came to clean.

This is what happened to ELLS: instead of paying proper attention to internal issues, the solution to the problems was projected on inviting guests (i.e. enlargement of the network), whereas these guests brought their own problems, hoping that ELLS would resolve them. In the end, no cleaning is done at all and everybody's mess increases. This leads to the first lesson for Bologna in crisis: stimulate internal investments over external cooperation.

The second lesson we can learn from ELLS is straight forward: EU funding policies can be very manipulative. Of course the universities have their own responsibility, yet the EU might be more thoughtful regarding the impulses caused by its funding strategies. In this case things had already gotten from bad to worse for the network; the risk of losing the summer school, its only concrete product, was too much. This is something Bologna should take into account; EU funding policies ought to be in line with Bologna strategies.

## **Bologna enduring the crisis**

As mentioned before, it is surprising that where Europe has been affected so largely by the crisis, none of the official reporting on the Bologna process takes it into consideration. The history of the Euroleague for Life Sciences demonstrates how dangerous this can be, which is subscribed to by some basic psychological principles. When in crisis, a person automatically narrows his thinking to the here and now. Creativity and openness are replaced by strong attention and focus on the problem in front of you. The world gets smaller until only you and the problem remain. This is a healthy habit if the problem is dangerous; you better make sure you fix what is ahead of you first, before it hurts you. The same psychological process takes place in institutions and even in countries. When things go well we are happy to share with others, when things get complicated we want to help ourselves first. For example, cuts in development aid are among the first to be mentioned when cutbacks are needed; albeit that even in the deepest crisis our live standards are far above those in parts of Africa.

Relating this to the agendas proposed by the EUA and the Ministers of Education, I come to the following conclusion. Forcing universities to focus on cooperation when they need time for their internal affairs does not make them good partners. Driving universities towards more Europeanization and joint globalization with large cutbacks drawing near, keeps them away from solving internal problems. The Ministers of Education proposed a list of no less than ten priorities, all covering a highly complex field. This is totally overwhelming in a financial crisis that (psychologically) enforces people to focus on what is in front of them. In order to maintain the political momentum and have the Bologna process survive the crisis, individual countries and universities need a focused action plan that clearly benefits themselves. When the crisis is over and Bologna survived, the more ambitious parts of Bologna can be picked up again. The history of European cooperation in higher education shows that in times of welfare universities automatically search for cooperation, even without external and/or financial stimuli (see for example the different EUA Trends Reports). This implies that once the crisis is over, the extension of international cooperation will automatically rejuvenate. Again this matches basic psychology: in times of happiness and welfare, sharing with others creates more happiness and welfare (Layard, 2005).

To make the idea of a solid, internally focused action plan more concrete, I draw on the report from Westerheijden et al (2009). Westerheijden et al stress the need for National

Qualification Frameworks (NQF) in order to facilitate further realization of the Bologna goals. Establishing a NQF is a national process, needing only a little guidance and coordination from the Bologna organization. The NQF's core aim is to formulate qualifications of graduates based on learning outcomes that are transparent and comparable. Having these learning outcomes established has several benefits, including facilitating graduate employment and student exchange within a country. The highly appreciated Tuning project is a concrete and very successful interpretation of the establishment of NQF's (Westerheijden et al (2009) and official Tuning website).

The potentially positive effect of the crisis is that things are changing. These changes affect universities in most countries, regarding funding and their internal organization. If Bologna can convince the participating countries that a National Qualifications Framework is beneficial for the university and can easily be incorporated in the changes that are already happening, the essential next step for Bologna becomes part of what already has to happen at the national and institutional level. This idea is supported by Westerheijden et al's case study. Ireland and The Netherlands, who were identified as high performers in the Bologna Process, benefitted from reform processes already underway in their countries with the Bologna goals fitting well in those changes. (Westerheijden et al 2009)

Therefore, the coming years the Bologna management should commit itself to the improvement of national systems, based on the collective outlines for National Qualification Frameworks, the three-cycle or Ba/Ma structure and the European Credit System. This gives countries the opportunity to resolve their own issues and improve their educational system. Yet they will do this in a way that is comparable to other countries, thereby eliminating the main constraint in the Bologna process at this moment: the incomparability and incompatibility of degrees and systems. However, this can only be done if EU funding policies match the Bologna objectives. Therefore it is essential for the Bologna management to cooperate tightly with its EU counterparts. The EU has committed itself to strong investment in education (European Commission 2010); Bologna should make sure the available resources are invested in the right causes.

## Literature

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