

## **“Education for Sustainable Development” and the Bologna Process – The Implementation of the Bologna Process in Germany**

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### **What does "Bologna" stand for?**

The Bologna Process involves 46 European countries striving to unify higher education institutions throughout Europe. The most important goal of the project is to create a common European Higher Education (and research) Area by 2010. This common space shall provide students, instructors, and the administration of high education institutions greater flexibility through the structural convergence process, but without doing away with national uniqueness and variety of education systems. Moreover, the European institutions are to become more attractive in the global competition of education systems. For this purposes, the Bologna Process has created a list of instruments. These include the introduction of tiered courses of study (Bachelors, Masters and PhD), simplify mutual recognition amongst higher education institutions through the award of the Diploma Supplement and the introduction of a new credit point system, cooperation in the area of quality assurance, promotion of greater mobility, and the strengthening of a European dimension in higher education.

### **The Bologna Process and "Education for Sustainable Development"**

In the Bergen Communiqué of 2005, the European Education Ministers declared to strengthen their course in bringing about a common higher education area building upon the principle of sustainable development. The involved participants agreed that European higher education institutions carry a joint responsibility to find the best answers to present and future social challenges on a national, regional, and international scale. Many of the goals brought forth in the Bologna Process, especially with regard to the European qualification framework, form a solid foundation for strengthening the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within the national higher education systems and academic disciplines.

"Bologna" stands for a unique, and virtually irreversible, commitment to reform on the part of the European member states. The Bologna partner-countries and the representative associations of higher education institutions have voluntarily obligated themselves to modernize their curricula and make the higher education system more accessible by 2010. At the same time, the reform process supports the implementation of ESD in many different aspects. Indeed, creating the common higher education area is not only about establishing internationally recognizable degrees, it involves fostering a change in perspective – from the instructors to the students and from the curricula to the skills to be acquired during study. This constitutes one of the most significant opportunities for the Bologna Process: a perhaps singular possibility has presented itself, not only to reform the education structure, but also to rethink the traditional curriculum contents and make them more learning-oriented. By offering students a way to complete a combination of modules, they would be able to expand their studies into other fields of study beyond a particular department's boundaries, thus making the course offerings both inter- and multidisciplinary. This in turn would enable students to establish new areas of concentration and integrate innovative approaches that address social challenges and thus education for sustainable development. At the same time, the needs of the labour market also play a vital role. Skills and learning objectives are being defined and transferred along the lines of employability in the open labour market.

The "impetus for reform" stemming from the Bologna Process has also triggered a discussion about the profiling of courses of studies, study contents and the curriculum. Many universities now see themselves as organizations continually confronted with self re-evaluation and growth, and within which their members actively take part in the process. Issues of sustainable development in ecological, economic, social and cultural dimensions are to play a more salient role in the institutions' internal dialogue on implementation concepts and the self-reflection of the institution as a whole. This does not only concern the course curricula (e.g. the integration of sustainability as a key concept in particular academic disciplines), but also the integration of sustainable processes into a higher education institution's day-to-day operations (e.g., through the incorporation of a sustainable network), its infrastructure (e.g., through the monitoring of sustainable goals and their development phases), as well as its relationship to respective ministries of education and/or research (e.g. the consideration of various sustainability viewpoints and reaching main goal agreements).

### **What are the effects of the Bologna Process on German higher education institutions?**

In the long term, the Bologna Process will strengthen the higher education institutions' position as autonomous units. Higher education will nonetheless remain a national responsibility,

especially a financial one. Until now many Bologna member-states have focussed on structural reforms of higher education with the goal of improving an international compatibility and transparency, an approach that has been not only necessary, but also effective. The “Bologna Europe” serves as a source of legitimacy for the national reform efforts and raises, at the same time, pressure on all involved participants in politics and society to act.

As part of the Bologna Process, the German higher education institutions regard curriculum reform, which is itself a much “older” task that existed before “Bologna”, as a main focus of their strategic development and an essential opportunity to improve the quality of education. The share of Bachelor and Master courses of study at German higher education institutions has reached nearly 50 percent; the process of adapting the remaining courses of study is already underway. One should note however that less than 15 percent of all students are matriculated in one of the new courses of study. This can be attributed to new students’ lack of information and uncertainty concerning the acceptance of the new degrees in the labour market. Nevertheless, the progress made is undoubtedly remarkable. The universities, especially the departments and faculties, are ready to take on the reform – a time consuming task which has to be taken on in addition to the daily university work.

In the course of the Bologna Process, higher education institutions have taken on the leading role in the establishment of quality-assurance structures and a new culture of quality for the institution as whole. At the same time, international recognition is being promoted through the achievement of comparable standards and structures for all courses of study. However, in the long-run the creation of a common European higher education area can not be reached merely through forming common structures. They must be complemented by a targeted and continuous dialogue between the higher education systems across Europe.

Following the Ministerial Conference in Berlin in May 2004, the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) created, with financial support from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), a Service Centre for Bologna and the Bologna Centre of Excellence in order to support and assist German institutions of higher education in the reform process. After a public tender for applications, to which 127 universities responded, the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) selected 22 model universities for presenting the best reform implementation proposals. Four additional universities received special recognition and funding on account of their already advanced progress in implementing reforms. Since then, 27 Bologna advisors have worked intensely “on-site” with the selected model institutions to assist in the reform process. Through systematic monitoring of the model higher education

institutions, the HRK Centre of Excellence has succeeded in gaining both general and specific insights into the opportunities and challenges posed by the Bologna reforms.

In addition to identifying the series of successes, for example the establishment of quality-assurance structures for the new degrees at the model institutions of higher education, a true “inventory” would not be complete without pointing out the problems and challenges. A sustainable implementation of the reforms makes additional funding indispensable, but funding – both from the German States (*Länder*) and the Federal government – so far has either been insufficient or lacking completely. Differing and even contradictory requirements in Germany also contribute to the delay in the implementation process.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the social dimension of the Bologna Process, as of yet, has received too little attention. Countries and national actors are required to improve the participation of all groups of society in education – in comparison with other European countries, Germany however, has much to improve in this area. In accordance with the concept of lifelong learning, European countries need to cooperate in finding ways to ease both the transition between the different education phases and the recognition of qualification between the various areas of education.

### **The external dimension of the Bologna Process**

The Bologna Process offers institutions of higher education the opportunity to internationalise through the reform of national higher education structures. As part of this process not only should the mobility of students, academics and researchers within the European higher education area be increased. A strategy on the so-called external dimension of the Bologna Process, i.e. cooperation on education-policy between “Bologna countries” and other regions of the world, is to be developed as well. Clearly, the issues of this global dialogue also vary considerably depending on the target country (e.g. industrial nations, threshold countries, developing countries). In addition to the agenda of “competitiveness and attractiveness” of the European Higher Education Area, which is considered by many participants the main concern,

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<sup>1</sup> See Christiane Gaehtgens / Peter A. Zervakis: *Implementing Bologna: Experience from German Higher Education Institutions*, in: *EUA Bologna Handbook. Making Bologna Work*, edited by Eric Froment, Jürgen Kohler, Lewis Purser, and Lesley Wilson, Berlin (to be published by 19 June 2007).

the European higher education institutions emphasize that the agenda of "partnership and cooperation" is particularly significant for the collaboration with countries outside of the European higher education area. As an entirely essential prerequisite, suitable trust measures – between universities and also between countries and nations – are accordingly being discussed at the same time.

In other regions of the world, information on the Bologna Process and its implications has, until now, often been insufficiently available. Consequently, the process is viewed in these places as a threat to existing cooperation. Thus it is urgently necessary for the Bologna countries to work out appropriate information strategies for the respective target regions. Most likely, the European Ministers of Education, who will meet in May 2007 in London, will re-examine the meaning of the external dimension of the Bologna-Process and especially the cooperation-based partnership with other regions of the world in the light of global challenges.

**Further Links:**

[The German Rectors' Conference](#)

[The Secretariat for Bologna](#)

[Bergen Communiqué](#)

[Support Programme for the "Bologna-Advisors for German Universities"](#)

[Lübeck Declaration "Schools and Sustainability"](#)