

## Commentary

---

### **The Bologna process: how the European university is endangered through the creation of a European space of higher education**

#### **Introduction: a new geography of Europe**

The Bologna process is the most important restructuring of higher education in Europe since May 1968. And it has everything to do with geography. Because, by the way of definition it is about creating a new European space: the construction of a “European Higher Education Area”. This new area comprises new borders, new standards, new rules of governance, and is meant to be academic as well as political. It even impacts upon the majority of European everyday lives. By 2007 ministers for education from forty-six countries in Europe had signed the Bologna document. Consequently, the European space of higher education stretches from the far East (Russia) to the far West (France), from the high North (Finland) to the deep South (Zypries). The construction of a new Europe of knowledge spaces is very advanced.

In this commentary I would like to walk around the lines of this phenomenon in two ways. First, as a geographer I am curious about the fact that, although the Bologna process is inherently about creating a new European space of higher education, geographers almost never discuss or scrutinize it. Second I am entangled with the Bologna process in a specific way. In a beautiful commentary in this journal Noel Castree wrote on developments of the new university in Britain (eg Research Assessment Exercise and beyond). In this context he stressed that “we need to take time out from researching and teaching and attend to... policy as it impacts our daily lives” (2006, page 1192). I have gone this way during the last two years. I have walked down the alley of taking on the position of Vice President for Academic Affairs and International Relations at my university, the University of Bremen. And it is from this two-sided position, as a geographer who has become a university administrator, that I am engaged in the Bologna process, namely trying to work with it in my institution. In the next few moments I will try to share some of my puzzling thoughts about Bologna with you. And although there are—of course—a lot of good things to be said about this pan-European project I concentrate here on the more problematic lines of the phenomenon. And while I write this, my best hopes as academic and administrator would be that through this commentary maybe some geographers will feel encouraged to pick up the issue academically and scrutinize the construction and consequences of this new European Higher Education Area.

#### **The Bologna process: aims and measures**

The geopolitical space of the Bologna process started in 1998 when twenty-eight European ministers for education signed a document called the “Bologna declaration”. Herein, they agreed upon the political objective to create a common space of higher education in Europe by the year 2010. Within a decade, so the politicians envisioned, a transparent market for higher education should emerge. And with that signature the politician agreed upon the construction of a new geopolitical space: the creation of a “European Higher Education Area” (EHEA) and a “European Research Area”. Since Bologna 1998 several ministerial meetings have taken place. Each of them marked a new step towards the new European space of higher education with new signatures and new communiqués. After their inaugural meeting in Bologna, ministerial meetings and communiqués have followed in Prague 2001, Berlin 2004, Bergen 2005, and London 2007. In April 2010 the

next ministerial meeting will take place in Leuven. Since the beginning of the Bologna process the number of participating European states has increased from twenty-eight to forty-six countries who have subscribed to the new geopolitics of the EHEA. Thus, the Bologna process has everything to do with the globalisation of knowledge production, of knowledge economies, and of knowledge societies. At the heart of the Bologna process lies the objective of constructing a new competitive European space for the global knowledge society (London communiqué 2007). This new EHEA is constructed to serve several goals:

- to promote the mobility of students and staff,
- to enhance the comparability of study programmes,
- to improve the employability of students,
- to foster student-centred and outcome-based learning,
- to set European standards and guidelines for quality assurance,
- to create a register of European higher education quality assurance agencies,
- to reaffirm higher education as a key element in making societies competitive and sustainable.

Though it might seem curious, the Bologna process is not driven or steered by the European Union (EU) itself. The EU has a vote in the follow-up group of every ministerial meeting. But the agents who act centre stage are the national ministers, institutional lobbyists, and experts in higher education themselves. The most important players dwell in a square of institutions, known as the “E-4”: the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), and the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA). All share specific notions of ‘Europe’ and ‘higher education’ in this transnational process—and they struggle with the paradoxical politics of the Bologna process at the same time.

#### **First challenge: from university to uniformity?**

The first challenge of the Bologna process consists of the overarching diversity that still runs through most of Europe’s higher education systems. Due to the fact that forty-six nation-states are tentatively marching in line for the purpose of comparable higher education structures, the relation of unity versus diversity, heterogeneity versus homogeneity poses a pressing issue. Even within many European nation-states a variety of policies on higher education prevail. Take, for example, Germany, a federal country that consists of sixteen *Länder* (states) who all act sovereign in their regulation of higher education. Sixteen different state rules apply to higher education. Thus, while the Bologna process strives for comparable structures in higher education for the continent, very nationally diverse contexts do exist. So how can European standards be implemented in higher education without suppressing national identities, cultures, and traditions in higher education? Thanks to this complex situation it is only through a paradoxical politics that the EHEA can be constructed and implemented wholeheartedly. In the words of the EUA, the organisation representing all universities and national rectors’ conferences in forty-five countries across Europe, this paradoxical approach is strongly approved: “The challenge at the European level—whether concerning the quality debate or other key Bologna issues—is to create a European higher education area that combines diversity across—and within—forty-five countries while adhering to unifying principles and values” (EUA, 2006, page 6). In consequence, the idea of having one’s cake and eating it becomes an intriguing political concept and guarantor of European consensus and compromise. Two competing goals lie at the heart of the Bologna process: strengthening Europe’s internal diversity and homogenizing comparable European structures. The ENQA thus uses a paradoxical rationale to

---

justify the standardization of quality assurance in Europe. The ENQA elaborates European standards and guidelines for quality assurance, yet their implementation is to address Europe's "diversity of political systems, higher education systems, socio-cultural and educational traditions, languages, aspirations and expectations. This makes a single monolithic approach to quality, standards and quality assurance in higher education inappropriate" (ENQA, 2005, page 10).

Until now, within the Bologna process the recognition of diverse doctoral programmes in Europe has been the most advanced example of a humble 'Europeanness', that is, one that is respectful of national traditions and intellectual diversity. Otherwise, on the level of bachelor and master degrees, much has been overdetermined for the sake of comparable degrees from the Polar circle to the Mediterranean. In consequence, the contemporary situation runs the danger of turning universities into uniformities. One of the most powerful bureaucratic instruments to increase the comparability of higher education within Europe is the "Qualification Framework for the European Higher Education Area" (QF-EHEA). The QF-EHEA was agreed at the ministers' conference in Bergen 2005. It was signed as part of the formal communiqué of the ministers and, thus, the framework is politically binding. It is a strategic means of securing transparency in higher education (Kohler, 2007, page 3). All study programmes in Europe are supposed to become transparent and comparable by forcing every higher education institution (HEI) to apply the same rules to their planning procedures. Every university now implements:

- student workload (European Credit Transfer System),
- learning outcomes,
- competences according to degrees (bachelor, master),
- profiles, etc.

The QF-EHEA is a technical, bureaucratic instrument which carries enormous political baggage. Common frames of reference are operated in the name of improving transparency, increasing student mobility, and rationalizing the planning processes in higher education. The idea of 'user protection'—be it for the sake of students or employers—plays an important role in the justifying rhetoric of this immense political process. The discourse of Bologna is organized around the needs for transparent higher education systems that enable European and non-European students as consumers to find the best (education) on offer in the (education) market.

But besides the 'users' of higher education the qualification framework is—like all of the Bologna process—part of an even bigger picture of the future of the EU. It is the Lisbon strategy of the EU itself that will be strengthened by the homogenization of academic activities. The Lisbon strategy has put one message on top of the political agenda: Europe has set the goal to become the world's leading region in the global knowledge society and knowledge economy. Henceforth, the creation of a common European space of higher education by the year 2010 is part and parcel of the EU's Lisbon vision. By improving the transparency of internal processes within each and every university at the level of study programmes a fierce competition between universities is to be enforced. First, European universities take on the burden of becoming transparent and comparable in order to be compared—and compete—with each other. Then, second, they are supposed to compete against HEIs around the world and, thereby, improve the economic competitiveness of Europe. The global positioning of Europe as a leading knowledge region of the world is fully dependent upon the full implementation of the Bologna process—so the politicians argue. The qualification framework should enable non-European consumers to identify and make use of Europe's higher education market. This important function of the framework as a means of communication on a global market for higher education is called the "external dimension" (Kohler, 2007, page 18).

---

**Second challenge: the transformation of education—from education (*Bildung*) to learning output and employability?**

The strategic “role that higher education institutions can and should play in the construction of Europe” has been an important starting point for the Bologna Process (EUA, 2006, page 6). Universities and academics have become objects of vested interests. Under the umbrella of lifting the ‘quality’ of higher education (that is, fostering the employability of students), improving the internal management of HEIs (that is, professionalizing knowledge transfer) and increasing the credibility of HEIs (that is, building a new reputation for universities around metaphors of utilitarianism for society), the meaning of higher education itself has changed enormously. In the London Communiqué the ministers affirmed that the Bologna process is closely intertwined with the Lisbon strategy, which suggests that knowledge and education take centre stage in an age of global economic competition on the basis of knowledge economies: “As we look ahead, we recognise that, in a changing world, there will be a continuing need to adapt our higher education systems, to ensure that the EHEA remains competitive and can respond effectively to the challenges of globalisation” (London Communiqué, 2007, page 1).

Thanks to the detection of the strategic role of universities in knowledge societies, politicians became astutely aware of the importance of this field of politics. Because universities are often state run it is the government that can actually take control of this important part of globalization strategies. Globalization, employability, and competitiveness have, henceforth, become buzzwords of the Bologna process. Therefore, it is the very idea of higher education and the European university that is at stake. Let me exemplify this with two brief points: (a) new management structures which replace the tradition of the republic of knowledge; (b) new concepts of student-centred teaching which replace the foundation of the university as a community of students and teachers (*Gemeinschaft der Lehrenden und Lernenden*).

*New management structures*

The Bologna process fosters the internal restructuring of academic institutions. Over the last ten years the EUA has observed systematically in the course of the institutional evaluation programme a consistent trend towards centralization of power within European universities: “A strengthened central leadership—primarily at the overall university level being alternatively the rector and the rector’s office, or the dean and the dean’s office in the sometimes competing relationships between department and faculties—appears to be a necessity for a university’s competitiveness” (Hofmann, 2005, page 21). The move towards competitiveness of HEIs fosters more autonomous entities that are much more centralized internally. A new asymmetry of power relations is being established, with a strong leadership and a competitive edge at the central management level of the university and weakened academics, who as researchers and teachers have less and less to say—yet, are assumed to buy into new institutional policies via competition for reputation and research money. Thus, a model of the ‘entrepreneurial university’, a university being managed rather than self-administered, appears as a new standard on the European plane. The introduction of strong hierarchies, though, goes against the grain of academic culture. This is also why a heavy managerial dilemma is associated with the new hierarchy—that is, the consequent detachment and disengagement of staff and students (Hofmann, 2005, page 21).

*New ideas of teaching*

Teaching under the conditions of the Bologna process has changed markedly, as well. Neither lecturers nor professors are the focus of administrators. Quite the opposite, what politicians preach is a switch of attention towards the needs and capabilities of students.

---

“There is an increasing awareness that a significant outcome of the process will be a move towards student-centred higher education and away from teacher driven provision. We will continue to support this important development” (London Communiqué, 2007, page 2). Whereas at first glance such a turn towards students’ needs is most necessary and welcome in the classroom, second thoughts quickly appear when listening more carefully to the new student-centred rhetoric of teaching in a Bologna mode. Then, an odd one-dimensional thinking becomes apparent. Of course, it is neither the students nor the teachers who solely determine what happens in the classroom. In fact, both sides shape the communication and both parties communicate. Therefore, a ‘student-centred’ rhetoric in higher education is an intellectually naïve movement, swinging the pendulum from one extreme (teacher-centred higher education) to the other. How can students’ education be separated from teachers’ engagement in practice? I would not know. A student-centred approach to teaching is a desperate shortcoming. It is a misconception, that puts an end to the idea of the European university itself.

Here, the tradition of academic teaching contains more wisdom, in that it upholds the knowledge of the complementary roles of teachers and students in academia (von Humboldt, 1810; Schelsky, 1963; Mittelstraß, 1994). Because the invention of academia and the foundation of universities are truly European achievements. With the beginning of Plato’s academy about 2300 years ago and since the first incorporation of a university in Bologna and Paris about 800 years ago the institutionalization of higher education and the search for truth have been truly European endeavours. The endeavour called the European university was invented as a community of professors and students who together strived for knowledge. At a university both status groups, students and teachers, engage in a scientific discourse. The major difference between them are the different perspectives with different degrees and depths of knowledge achieved so far—yet, the subject is centre stage.

#### **Bologna effects—who is to judge?**

In Germany 45% of all study programmes at HEIs are either bachelor or master programmes. Thus, the Bologna process has already taken possession of half of the higher education system in Germany (BMBF, 2007, page 8). Yet, a recent study by the German Higher Education Information System (*Hochschulinformationssystem GmbH HIS*) shows that student mobility has, indeed, decreased with Bologna. Students were more mobile when they were admitted to traditional study programmes in Germany like the diploma (*Diplom*) or *Magister*. The new Bologna-compatible structures of master and bachelor degrees have, therefore, recently been labelled a ‘deadend’ (*Sackgasse*) in terms of student mobility (Grigat, 2007, page 1). In consequence, the general secretary of the German Rectors’s Conference, Christiane Gaethgens expressed her concerns. She felt “rather concerned” (*einigermaßen besorgt*) about the partly depressing results so far (Gaethgens quoted in Grigat, 2007, page 1). The rise of bureaucracy and growth of rigid structures in many study programmes put the universities (that is, teachers and students!) under pressure, while the budgets for higher education in Germany are mostly shrinking. And, of course, all over Europe there are many parallel concerns:

- The Bologna process asks for comparable, easy-to-read degrees from all universities, all certified under the European Credit Transfer System logic. Yet, in what sense is a university education from one place comparable with that from another? And how helpful are the measures by which the Bologna process creates comparability?

- The Bologna process is heavily geared towards employability. Student employability has become a major theme in higher education. But what is the meaning of employability? And how is it to be achieved? The orientation of academic education along the short-lived lines of the job market could be misleading.
- The Bologna process fosters standardization and homogenization: “There will be European standards for internal and external quality assurance, and for external quality assurance agencies.... A European register of quality assurance agencies will be produced. A European Register Committee will act as a gatekeeper for the inclusion of agencies in the register” (ENQA, 2005, page 5). How would geographers comment on that?
- The Bologna process tries to put Europe in pole position. How will the other competitors in the race—the United States, Canada, or Australia—react? Will they accept the results of Bologna-Europe? Will the Bologna process help to make the European universities more competitive globally? Whether this will be achieved or whether the Bologna process in the long run will have systematically weakened European universities has to be seen. The competitive edge of American universities is hard to counter with a European harmonization process that burdens creativity with the weight of rigid bureaucratic structures.

The longer the Bologna process is at work, the more problems occur. The president of the German rectors' conference, Professor Margot Wintermantel, recently called for a “slowing down of the reform in the interest of better sustainability” (*Entschleunigung des Reformtempos im Interesse höherer Nachhaltigkeit* quoted in Grigat, 2007, page 1). But as most geographers are aware: space and time cannot be separated. Thus, a timely extension can only be effective if combined with spatial flexibility. The creation of a common European Higher Education Area might need a revised architecture that addresses the paradoxical politics of the Bologna process in more nuanced and balanced ways.

In a recent comment in this journal on universities and academic freedom Noel Castree asked the pressing question: “what sorts of institutional conditions produce what kind of geographical knowledges?” (2006, page 1189). He further argued that “the national state remains the best guarantor of academic freedom to the extent that it upholds the idea that universities have the right to be self-governing” (page 1191). I am not sure how much of a threat the Bologna process actually is to the idea and history of European universities. But I do know that the history of universities in Europe is a history of liberation and petrification, of decay and reform (Schelsky, 1963, page 13). The transformation of the university—like the transformation of societies—is a constant process. And just now we are witnessing only the latest round. Around 1200, in medieval times, the birth of the university in Europe was not caused by economic or political, secular or religious motives. Neither the state nor the church, neither merchants nor the aristocracy prepared the ground for the invention of this very specific place of reflection in society, the university. The occidental seedbed of the European university as a community of students and teachers was solely prepared by one rationale: the will to truth (Schelsky, 1963, page 15). The scientific endeavour itself was the birthplace of the university. The European university was international from its beginnings in that the university stood in for a gathering of scholars and students from diverse cultural, religious, and national backgrounds. In Italy (Bologna), France (Paris), Austria (Vienna), Germany (Heidelberg), etc the idea of the university as a site for the search for truth and the production of knowledge blossomed from the 13th century on.

The first crisis began at the end of medieval period. With the end of medieval notions of unity the idea of a European university came under siege. It was the Renaissance and Reformation that gave the university a new face in a new epoch. The second crisis was induced by the end of the Renaissance paradigm (*Weltbild*). In fact, the rationalism and utilitarianism of the Enlightenment period posed a serious threat to the *'Tart pour l'art'* (science for science sake) character of the traditional European university. Around 1800 the European university was in great danger with the successful rise of academies that came to harbour more and more research activities. This crisis in Germany was solved with the invention of a new model of a German university, the concept of Wilhelm von Humboldt. German idealism in the early 19th century prepared for a very special renaissance of the idea of a university, where higher education (to be more precise: the untranslatable *Bildung*) could not possibly be defined by scientific reasoning; hence, it meant something more humane (Schelsky, 1963, page 304).

I would suggest that from a historic perspective it is reasonable to say that the Bologna process marks the next epochal point of transition in time. It fosters the transition of the European university towards a new model: the entrepreneurial university that is accountable to society. Thus, science for science sake becomes more and more a minority position, whereas the future employability of students and the profitability of knowledge are taking the lead. From a geographer's perspective I would argue that this historic university reform under the umbrella of European policy is different from all its predecessors in a very specific way: in that it—for the first time in history—tries to achieve what European universities have for a long time avoided: creating uniformity through the creation of a standardized space. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a powerful instrument. Geography matters, once again. But I am optimistic and hopeful that history will matter, too. The idea of a European university has been around for about 800 years. I am confident that it will survive this third crisis of transformation. Yet, as in the historical periods before, it will take us academics (staff and students!) to carry it through.

Ilse Helbrecht, Department of Geography, University of Bremen

#### References

- BMBF, 2007 *Zweiter Bericht zur Realisierung der Ziele des Bologna-Prozesses von KMK und BMBF* Bundesbildungsministerium für Bildung und Forschung, Berlin
- Castree N, 2006, "Geographical knowledges, universities, and academic freedom" *Environment and Planning A* **38** 1189–1192
- ENQA, 2005 *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Helsinki
- EUA, 2006 *Quality Culture in European Universities: A Bottom-up Approach. Report on the three Rounds of the Quality Culture Project 2002–2006* European University Association, Brussels
- Grigat F, 2007, "Masterplan ohne Mastermind: zum aktuellen Stand des Bologna-Prozesses an deutschen Hochschulen" *Forschung und Lehre* **14** 276–278
- Hofmann S, 2005 *10 Years on: Lessons learned from the Institutional Evaluation Programme* European University Association, Brussels
- Kohler J, 2007, "Europäische Qualifikationsrahmen und ihre Bedeutung für die einzelstaatlichen Studiensysteme. European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL)—Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)", in *Handbuch Qualität in Studium und Lehre* Eds W Benz, J Kohler, K Landfried (Raabe, Berlin) pp 1–38
- London Communiqué, 2007 *Towards the European Higher Education Area: Responding to Challenges in a Globalised World* (Bologna Press, London)
- Mittelstraß J, 1994 *Die unzeitgemäße Universität* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main)

- 
- Schelsky H, 1963 *Einsamkeit und Freiheit: Idee und Gestalt der deutschen Universität und ihrer Reformen* (Rowohlt, Reinbek)
- von Humboldt W, 1810 *Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin*; reprinted in *Die Idee der deutschen Universität. Die fünf Grundschriften aus der Zeit ihrer Neugründung durch klassischen Idealismus und romantischen Realismus* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt) 1956, pp 375 – 386