

Useful Bologna handbook – but ... is the Bologna process becoming too

by Jan Petter Myklebust

The timing of this 'Handbook' is good. As practitioners at European universities are now experiencing extensive reform processes, we have been looking for guidelines, recommendations, sharing of experience and benchmarking of good practice.

The Bologna process has released much energy in the European higher education sector. Optimism still prevails. But the initial message at Sorbonne in 1998 and in Bologna the year after was a process of simplification of the degree structures in European universities. The major objective was to create mutual trust and openness towards academic recognition of degrees and parts of degrees across Europe, to facilitate mobility and international collaboration. The focus of the Bologna process is now on quality assessment and employability. And increasingly – upon the intervention of the European Commission – the focus is now more upon the **modernisation** of European universities. This is a shift of focus from academic recognition and internationalisation to governance of universities and governmental policy issues. We then run the risk of discussing resources, not reforms. This is a risk. Europe is still too diversified with regard to available resources for the higher education sector. We still are still at the very beginning of the implementation processes. Too much emphasis on common national and institutional policies might backfire, and reduce the speed of these highly needed reforms. What is

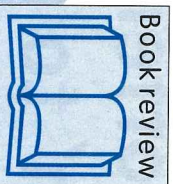
already happening is a Bologna reform process being implemented at very different speeds in the 45 signatory countries. The *Handbook* is actively promoting the European Higher Education Area throughout the articles. They represent a rhetorical instrument to focus the attention and mobilise for action, and are not necessarily analytical tools. The EHEA should not be the **only** analytical tool used to advise European universities on how to reform. The universities' function as centres for the development of critical thinking is being forgotten in the strive for 'Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems' (COM (2006) 481 Final, 8.9.2006. That document is advocating strong market liberalisation of the European higher education sector. This is not wise. The Bologna agenda should be broadened to include critical thinking as a major objective of universities in their reform processes. The *Handbook* might be of great help in this.

Influential

The *EUA Bologna Handbook* will have great impact on the ongoing reform processes in higher education in Europe. The four editors are influential experts with great competence, integrity and analytical abilities. Eric Froment, Jürgen Kohler, Lewis Purser and Lesley Wilson have been working in the top leadership of EUA – the European University Association – for many years. They have held senior executive functions in other European organisations and institutions working for greater international collaboration between higher education institutions. Together with more than 20 other authors, they identify the Bologna process as the major agent of change in the European higher education sector today. They map out the dimension of the changes and major challenges ahead. This is very useful. Almost all of the articles bring some new understanding. The *Handbook* is divided into three sections: 'Understanding Bologna in context'; 'Introducing Bologna objectives and



complex?



Book review

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tools' and 'Implementing Bologna in your institution'. The third section is the shortest, but this might be redressed in the announced supplements to the

Handbook. Using the 'Europeanisation as a strategy for implementing Bologna at the Babes-Bolyai University of Romania' as the only case study is not very representative. This article demonstrates how to ensure institutional coherence when introducing Bologna principles. But this case does not cover the institutional policy question that has to be addressed in many research-intensive universities in Europe today. These universities might have been ambivalent about the Bologna process owing to the exclusive focus on the degree structure in the initial phases and only later including research through the inclusion of doctoral education. The 'third cycle' is now becoming a central focus for many of the research-intensive universities. Case studies on how to handle the many issues involved should be included in the follow-up studies. This could be a priority task for Section D of the *Handbook*, where there is still no entry: 'Moving beyond Bologna: the European Higher Education Area after 2010'.

Trends and perspectives

The *Handbook* is, paradoxically, most interesting when it is delving into trends and challenges. The article by Peter Scott on 'Bologna in a global context' is an excellent analysis. He gives us clues as to the priorities that might come next in the Bologna process.

The article by Andrejs Rauhvargers is a must for everyone working with recognition of degrees and parts of degrees, since the Lisbon Convention is the foundation for this work and not the Bologna process itself. Peter Scott says, "new action lines have been added that are not deliberately designed to enhance the profile, reputation and competitiveness of European universities?". This might be so, but it should have been discussed whether it is wise to enforce the tempo of the Bologna

process. There are 45 signatory states to the Bologna declaration as of 2005. Many of the former Soviet Union higher education systems still have a division between research being undertaken at the Academies of Science and teaching taking place at the universities. For these countries, "the European dimension must be given legitimacy or re-encouraged through powerful incentives". But their reform challenge is also much greater. There is no 'quick-fix' to this: many of the Bologna action lines have not yet started to gain momentum in these states. An example is doctoral training which is still organised ineffectively, with too little capacity. The same is the case for joint degrees, which have been the focus of the last two ministerial meetings in the Bologna process. We are still seeing few good examples of joint PhD degrees in Europe. The pro-rector of Helsinki University, Marja Makarow, said at the UKGRAD annual meeting in London in September¹ that the joint PhD degree in biomedicine between Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and Helsinki University took one year of intensive planning before it could be established. Such case studies should be included in further editions of the *Handbook*. The major danger for the Bologna process is red tape and increased bureaucratisation, which can alienate the scientific staff at universities from getting actively involved in the process.

Learning outcomes

The *Handbook* extensively covers the ongoing work with learning outcomes as the core of the Bologna system for academic recognition. Comparing study periods is out, it is stated in the *Handbook*. We – who have worked within European higher education for some time – still remember the pre-Bologna time, using the 'time-for-time' principle for academic recognition. That worked fine. The operationalisation of learning outcomes might run into problems if the system specifies too many such learning compet-

ences that have to be checked when granting academic recognition. We have seen examples of 17 such learning outcomes recently, referring to the TUNING project. Could this extensive promotion of learning outcomes establish a distrust of the evaluation done by the teaching staff at European universities? Who is going to deal with such complexity at the higher education institutions? Will cross-national criteria work out? Will we need a huge staff of 'learning outcome experts', substituting the academic staff?

The *Handbook* is certainly giving some of the answers. The price is EUR 138, to be complemented with EUR 269 annually for 600 pages of yearly updates, sent out quarterly. This is good value for money.

¹ http://www.researcherconferences.org.uk/postevent_slides/Marja%20Makarow%20slides.pdf

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EUJA Bologna Handbook: Making Bologna Work, Berlin: Dr Josef Raabe Verlag, 2006, www.bologna-handbook.com