

Bologna confusion – more optimism

by Jan Petter Myklebust

In the summer 2004 issue of EAIE Forum, Ulrich Littmann rhetorically asked whether he should tell his students that the Bologna processes are ‘fake or promise for the future’.

He then confuses the issue by comparing post cold war developments of higher education in Europe with those of the United States. Instead of looking for such similarities, which his article is full of, Littmann should have analysed the differences between higher education in Europe and the US. What does he mean by ‘promise’ in his headline? That European higher education shall become more similar to that of the US?

This precondition is, of course, false. Europe is much more heterogeneous than the US and has a much longer history – also in terms of higher education. What happened in Europe in the 1990s was a process towards mass education at university level, with a huge expansion of student numbers in most countries. Parallel to this expansion, higher education systems in the many nation states in Europe grew apart with regard to admission criteria, degree recognition, grading scales, modularisation of courses, curriculum content, language requirements, degree titles, *etc.* On almost every parameter where higher education was compared across European states, greater differences between country systems were reported over time. The European Union programmes initiated in the late 1980s had ambitious goals of student mobility and flexibility of European educational exchanges as major objectives. Towards the mid-1990s it became clear that these ambitious goals would not be reached.

Bologna

At the celebration of Sorbonne University’s 800th anniversary in 1998, the higher education ministers of France, Germany and the UK met and discussed what could be done. They called for an expanded role of the ministries of education in the European states, to complement activities in the European Commission. They called for a meeting in

1999 in Bologna, where representatives from 29 countries met and signed an agreement to work towards the creation of a European Higher Education Area in 2010. This agreement – at the time a Memorandum of Agreement – called for a common structure of higher education in the signatory states. This structure is not particularly American in its basic model. The agreement specified instruments to be applied to achieve greater convergence of higher education systems in the signatory states with the specific objective of creating increased academic mobility and employability of graduate candidates in Europe. It is not possible to imagine a greater difference between this common objective at a governmental level in Europe and the system in the US where at a federal level they are very careful not to set any national standards or objectives.

Optimism

What Littmann under-communicates in his article by focusing on the development in the US, is the optimism, enthusiasm and energy that the Bologna process has been met with (as well as resistance, of course) – and the speed at which the changes in higher education structures, proposed by the Bologna declarations in subsequent ministerial meetings, have been implemented at national and institutional levels in the signatory states. Today, many of the Bologna

Ulrich Littmann responds:

I regret that my linguistic shortcomings have caused some major misreadings/misunderstandings: for 40 years I have been known as a warner against importing American models for German university reforms, since the ‘genotypical’ (legal, academic, societal) differences need to be stressed against ‘phenotypical’ similarities which appear to attract reform politicians; therefore, I object to the incorrect (if not careless) use of American terminology in European reforms and caution about its consequences.

At the time of writing, a major conference is planned for October 2004 – sponsored by ACA, the German Federal Ministry of Education and the University of Hamburg – on the issue of how to make the Bologna structure attractive for non-European students, institutions and governments as well as competitive on the worldwide market of higher education. As this will be the first conference on this issue – five years after the Bologna Declaration – will we again gloss over the basic differences in European use of terms and conditions as compared to the competitors in North America and Asia?

www.aca-secretariat.be/o8events/Hamburg/HamburgConferenceOverview.htm

needed!

It is not possible to imagine a greater difference between this common objective and the system in the US

tem. When trying to create consortia for the ERASMUS Mundus programme, we now experience great difficulties with those institutions claiming fees from their students. We meet the same problems when discussing study abroad arrangements with institutions in the US for the exchange of students.

Institutional commitment

What is needed in academic collaboration schemes in Europe and across Europe is stronger institutional commitment, where students can serve as a 'glue' towards accumulated institutional collaboration over time. Joint degrees, which are now the main model in the ERASMUS Mundus programme, will enhance such institutional commitment in Europe. In this respect, the US does not serve as a model for Europe at all, as it is very difficult to transfer credits from institutions in Europe to graduate studies

in the US, and in particular if the student wants to study at more than one institution in the US.

Littmann seems to think that the Bologna process is only dealing with structures. But we will see students challenging national legislation. Already today, a student in Russia might approach his or her university questioning, for example, the regulations awarding the PhD degree on a principal basis.

Littmann should join forces to work for a greater institutional commitment to the Bologna objectives, and tell his students about the promise of joint degrees. ■

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objectives have already been incorporated into the legal system of higher education in most of the Bologna signatory states. A high number of organisations at European and national level participating in the Bologna process are giving their recommendations and proposals for changes, that makes this a 'grass-root process of change', to a much larger extent than the EU Commission's mobility schemes a decade earlier. Such a parallel development is not visible in the US. One factor which makes it difficult to understand the effects of the Bologna process is the parallel increase in the speed of other global processes which influence higher education systems. The increased international market for trade in higher education as a trade commodity, as well as the tendency to offer e-learning in university courses – now becoming available across nation states – are good examples of this.

Money

There is, however, one factor that is not explicitly mentioned in Littmann's article: **money**.

The main obstacle for academic mobility between universities in the US and Europe today is the fee system in the US and the bureaucracy related to this sys-