

The University and Civil Society: Autonomy and Responsibility

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Plenary Session: *The Bologna Process and Beyond.*

THE CHALLENGES OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

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The EU is set to face several tough and ever-growing challenges in the years to come, in particular globalisation and the integration of several new Member States, transforming Europe into a science-based economic area.

We should not forget that at the Lisbon Summit in 2000 and the Barcelona Summit in 2002 the Council of Ministers had laid down the ambitious objective of turning Europe into the most competitive economic area in the world over the next decade with the most dynamic scientific system, achieving higher levels of quality employment and greater social cohesion.

Education and, in particular, higher education is obviously the delicate pivot of this ambitious project, and the Bologna Process is the principal instrument for achieving excellence in education.

The Bologna Declaration, adopted on 19th June 1999 by twenty-nine European Ministers of Higher Education, was preceded by a wide-ranging debate about the role of the University in the development of the cultural dimensions of Europe.

Two fundamental stages were the “Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region”, held in Lisbon in April 1997, and the “Sorbonne Joint Declaration on Harmonisation of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System” signed on 25th May 1998 in Paris by the Ministers of Higher Education of France, Germany, Italy and the UK.

In the **Sorbonne Declaration**, the four Ministers agreed on the need “to create a European area of higher education, where national identities and common interests can interact and strengthen each other for the benefit of Europe, of its students, and more generally of its citizens”. In the conclusion they expressed the hope that “other member States of the Union and other European countries” would become part of this project.

This hope was fulfilled the following year, on **19th June 1999**, when 29 European Ministers responsible for higher education signed the **Bologna Declaration** in which they undertook to create a **European Higher Education Area**, fully respecting the wealth and variety of European cultural diversity. The creation of the European Higher Education Area should be completed by 2010.

The aim of the process is thus to make the higher education systems in Europe converge towards a more transparent system.

The Bologna Declaration also laid down six actions of “primary relevance in order to establish the European area of higher education and to promote the European system of higher education world-wide” to enhance “the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education”.

The six actions are the following:

1. A system of **academic grades** that are **easy to read and compare**, including the introduction of the **diploma supplement** (designed to improve international "transparency" and facilitate academic and professional recognition of qualifications);
2. A system essentially based on **two cycles**: a first cycle geared to the employment market and lasting at least three years and a second cycle (Masters) conditional upon the completion of the first cycle;
3. A system of **accumulation and transfer of credits** (of the **ECTS** type already used successfully under **Socrates-Erasmus**);
4. **Mobility** of students, teachers and researchers;
5. Cooperation in regard to **quality assurance**;
6. The **European dimension** of higher education.

The Bologna Process is particularly significant in political terms, in that it has raised the awareness, in a systematic and pressing way, of European Governments and the general public in the various Member States, as to the importance of higher education and research as the core tools of progress and development. In practical terms, the main role of the Bologna Process has been to accelerate and guide long-term structural changes.

In the belief that the construction of a European Space for Higher Education is a process requiring the participation of a wide range of different groups, while at the same time requiring constant monitoring and adaptation, it was decided to hold intergovernmental meetings every two years.

We shall go back over the stages in the development of the Bologna Process identifying those elements that more specifically refer to the relationship between the European training system outlined in the Bologna Process and civil society, bearing in mind how the concept of responsibility and autonomy are articulated.

In the first place, we can say that a recognition of the importance of civil society is inherent to the working method of the development phases of the Bologna Process: the preparatory activity between the two-year activities of the intergovernmental meetings and the debate internal to the meetings, see the participation of various associations of civil society, including among others: the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) and the Council of Europe. It can therefore be argued that it is a question of a process managed by the European national governments, which have the responsibility for the higher training, with an opening to the social and professional components most involved in the issue.

In the second place, we can argue that a civic dimension of the Bologna Process is found in some of the objectives of 1999, and in particular:

- The achievement of the objective of the ease of reading and comparing the academic qualifications and the introduction of a system based on two cycles: on the one hand, it makes it easier for graduates to be employed and, on the other, it gives rise to greater transparency of the university systems towards society as a whole which can, therefore, assess the results;
- Among the motivations behind student, teacher and research worker mobility, lies the conviction that there are measures which, by eliminating the obstacles that still exist hampering their freedom of movement, lead the protagonists of the European university systems to a greater understanding of the cultural and social diversities of the European states that are shown to be elements of the wealth of the European dimension;
- Among the motivations that lie at the root of the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies we should

bear in mind both the need to guarantee society in regard to the results obtained by the university system and the adoption of the accountability criterion by this system.

At the inter-ministerial **Prague** conference held on **19th May 2001** the ministers analysed the enforcement of what had been decided upon in Bologna as well as introducing new objectives that refer to the relationship with civil society.

The first of these objectives is **lifelong learning**, understood as “an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life”. Through lifelong learning society’s own goals such as social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life by rights enter the objectives of the Bologna Process.

Again in the Prague Communiqué, the importance of **student participation** stressed (mainly through their representative bodies) at the Bologna Process and, even more generically, the need to make the European area of higher education **attractive to the rest of the world**, was re-stated.

In **Berlin**, on **19th September 2003**, the Ministers responsible for higher education from 33 European countries reaffirmed “the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level. In that context, Ministers reaffirm their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. They emphasise that in international academic cooperation and exchanges, academic values should prevail”.

These words put in the foreword to the final communiqué of the Berlin conference clearly expresses some of the values options of the Bologna Process that to some extent refer to the subject of this conference.

Indeed, it is argued that higher education is a **public good** with **social responsibility**. This assumption defines the values to which we must anchor the enhancement of the knowledge and the competencies carried forward by the university systems: reinforcing social cohesion and reducing the social and gender inequalities. This underlying value choice justified the public funding that in Europe is allocated to the universities, unfortunately in an increasingly insufficient manner at least in Europe.

The **European University Association** (EUA) in its document entitled “A Vision and Strategy for Europe’s Universities” (12th March 2006) defines this association’s stance, which groups together the majority of the European universities, in relation to “The Public Role of the European Universities”.

The EUA underlines, first of all, the many challenges awaiting Europe:

- “The European Union must continue to develop its institutions and internal market, now the largest in the world, as well as to deepen its formal relations with neighbouring European countries. Europe’s countries must learn to work even better together.
- Europe must respond to increasing globalisation and the development of economic competitors by increasing its own innovative potential and competitiveness, while also accepting a **responsibility** to assist other areas of the world to **share in the fruits of economic progress** which Europe now enjoys.
- Demographic changes, in particular the ageing of many populations, are likely to foster further **internal migration and immigration**; at the same time, they will add to the emphasis on **lifelong learning** which is required by the rapid development of technology and extensions of working life.
- **Environmental issues**, such as the interplay between climate change and the use of energy, require urgent action, scientific, technological and political.

- As labour becomes relatively scarcer and more expensive, it will be ever more important to maintain living standards and foster economic growth through further technological innovation. Economic growth is at the foundation of the development of the European social model.
- For the same reason, as well as for the good of society as a whole, Europe must **overcome social exclusion and ensure that all its citizens play, to the full extent of their capacity, a role in society and the economy.**

Europe's universities and their staffs and students will engage in policy-making to meet all these challenges. Through their research and teaching in all fields of scholarship, universities will not only provide the evidence needed for sound policy formation but will use their expertise to contribute to discussion and debate in national and European policy-making".

Again in Berlin, the Ministers dealt with another problem concerning the relationship between the training system and civilian society. Must the training system only transmit knowledge that is developed outside the universities or else must it develop, at the same time, a research activity and a teaching activity that draws the "raw materials" from the former? That is to say, the juxtaposition between **teaching universities** and **research universities**. The answer was a clear one: the universities must carry on with both research activities and teaching activities. Indeed, today we no longer speak of a two-cycle system, but made up of three, singling out the research doctorate as the third level of the study cycle. "Ministers agree that efforts shall be undertaken in order to secure closer links overall between the higher education and research systems in their respective countries. The emerging European Higher Education Area will benefit from synergies with the European Research Area, thus strengthening the basis of the Europe of Knowledge. The aim is to preserve Europe's cultural richness and linguistic diversity, based on its heritage of diversified traditions, and to foster its potential of innovation and social and economic development through enhanced cooperation among European Higher Education Institutions". In underlining the **complementary relationship between the construction of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area** some objectives have been introduced that once again introduce the social issues within the Bologna Process. In particular, the identification of the European cultural and linguistic diversities as a wealth and not as a drawback, on the one hand, and the need for close cooperation between all the European higher education institutions, which are also in competition with one another.

In Berlin, the European Ministers of Higher Education made timid reference to some commitments that the national government should take in regard to the university systems that adapt to the social responsibilities that are entrusted to them: "Aware of the contribution strong institutions can make to economic and societal development, Ministers accept that institutions need to be **empowered to take decisions on their internal organisation and administration**. Ministers further call upon institutions to ensure that the reforms become fully integrated into core institutional functions and processes". The governance models hitherto adopted by the university systems are recognised as being inadequate in regard to the new tasks.

The European Ministers who took part in the subsequent Conference, held in **Bergen** on **19th – 20th May 2005**, represented as many as 45 countries, thereby showing the way in which the Bologna Process is broadening well beyond the 29 signatories of 1999 and well beyond the boundaries of the European Union.

The relationship between university system and civil society, also in this case, has been dealt with in various points:

- In the first place it has been reiterated that the process of reform of the European higher education systems must be carried forward within a **partnership activity** between the national governments, the institutions of the European Union, the universities and other subjects of civil society. "We welcome the support of organisations representing business and the social partners and look forward to intensified cooperation in reaching the goals of

the Bologna Process. We further welcome the contributions of the international institutions and organisations that are partners to the Process;

- Subsequently, when the final communiqué reiterated the need for **dialogue between the social and institutional forces** in regard to the need to increase the chances of young graduates getting employment: “there is a need for greater dialogue, involving Governments, institutions and social partners, to increase the employability of graduates with bachelor qualifications, including in appropriate posts within the public service”;
- In another paragraph of the communiqué, the **social dimension** of the Bologna Process is dealt with from a different standpoint in regard to the one outlined in Berlin: the various opportunities to attend the universities in relation to the unequal socio-economic conditions of the potential students. “The social dimension of the Bologna Process is a constituent part of the EHEA and a necessary condition for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. We therefore renew our commitment to making quality higher education equally accessible to all, and stress the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. The social dimension includes measures taken by governments to help students, especially from socially disadvantaged groups, in financial and economic aspects and to provide them with guidance and counselling services with a view to widening access”;
- Another aspect refers to the relationship between the European education system and the **cooperation with the other parts of the world**. A relationship must be developed based on the ethical principles of sustainable development and the prevailing of the academic values in the international relations between university systems. “The European Higher Education Area must be open and should be attractive to other parts of the world. Our contribution to achieving education for all should be based on the principle of sustainable development and be in accordance with the ongoing international work on developing guidelines for quality provision of cross-border higher education. We reiterate that in international academic cooperation, academic values should prevail”.

In the conclusions of the Bergen communication, the European Ministers sum up the distinguishing features of the whole of the Bologna Process placing it at the intersection between the various demands that should drive Europe development. Quality, transparency, diversity, research, training, innovation, autonomy, active citizenship are some of the concepts expressed. In this final part of the communication, the demand for **transparency, responsibility and accountability** are linked for the first time, albeit somewhat timidly, to **autonomy and funding** which the university systems must benefit from. “Building on the achievements so far in the Bologna Process, we wish to establish a European Higher Education Area based on the principles of quality and transparency. We must cherish our rich heritage and cultural diversity in contributing to a knowledge-based society. We commit ourselves to upholding the principle of public responsibility for higher education in the context of complex modern societies. As higher education is situated at the crossroads of research, education and innovation, it is also the key to Europe’s competitiveness. As we move closer to 2010, we undertake to ensure that higher education institutions enjoy the necessary autonomy to implement the agreed reforms, and we recognise the need for sustainable funding of institutions. The European Higher Education Area is structured around three cycles, where each level has the function of preparing the student for the labour market, for further competence building and for active citizenship”.

As the reforms of the European university systems allow for the achievement of the specific objectives set by the Bologna Process, the issues that the European higher education systems will have to deal with inside as well as beyond the boundaries of the Bologna Process will concern both what the universities do for society and what society gives back to the universities in order to enable them to fulfil the many functions that we have so far pointed out.

The first aspect concerns the **funding of the university systems** which, considering the policies and the economies of our countries will increasingly be private, even if the national States cannot hold back from their duty of guaranteeing public funding for basic research and for the university system¹. The sole condition that will have to be set is that such funding shall be compatible with “fair access and social justice”. The universities, on the other hand, as argued by the EUA, with a very different attitude as compared with the self-referential closure that the universities had shown in the past, are committed to “demonstrating their efficiency and effectiveness in return for either public or private funding”.

The second aspect concerns the concept that has been put forward in the title of this Congress alongside that of responsibility: autonomy. The EUA, once again, introduces an issue that is central to the development, historical as well, of the university systems, namely **autonomy**, linking it indissolubly to that of social **responsibility**. “Mission diversity, strategic capability, and accountability can only be developed if universities have the freedom to do this. The higher education system must therefore be based on autonomous institutions, with freedom to control and manage their own resources and to compete as well as collaborate, accepting the responsibility to make the most efficient use possible of the resources which they command; this requires that universities are trusted to act responsibly. Old state bureaucratic systems which prefer control over trust must be swept away so that universities can respond rapidly and efficiently to the needs of society and the economy.”

The European university systems, also thanks to the effects of that Process which started off in Bologna, a few yards away from the room where we are now, must today deal with a difficult and demanding task. They have to re-think their own way of working and being in society in order to offer the young, the economic, social and cultural institutions and the national and supra-national governments a social contract in which, with loyalty, the different tasks are defined in order to combine the shouldering of responsibility by the university systems with the recognition of the resources and the autonomy necessary on the part of society’s institutions.

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¹ “Europe should not expect to get any of its universities on the cheap. The universities require adequate funding. Both public and private sources must be available, if universities are to carry out their work to the best international standards. Most European governments are unable or unwilling to finance, through taxation, the expansion of higher education that has recently occurred or that is to come. As expansion continues, it is inevitable that it will depend on an increase of private funds; universities must continue to ensure that this is compatible with fair access and social justice. Universities recognize, also, that they must demonstrate their efficiency and effectiveness in return for either public or private funding” (EUA, “A Vision and Strategy for Europe’s Universities” 12th March 2006).

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