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### European higher education policy: what is its relevance for the United Kingdom?

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#### **Summary**

*The introduction of student loans and means-tested tuition fees in the UK has had a significant effect on the relative situation of European Union students. This paper explores how these changes impact on reciprocal agreements that govern the mobility of students within Europe and the organisation and funding of research activities. The paper argues that decisions concerning higher education in the UK cannot be made without an awareness of the European dimension.*

#### **Introduction**

The British Labour Government is one of many European governments to see in education a way to address issues of persistent social inequalities, in particular those related to life chances and access to the job market. The policy of increased access to higher education is a case in point. However, the introduction of student loans and means-tested tuition fees has had a significant effect on the relative situation of European Union (EU) students in the UK because of the reciprocal agreement that governs the mobility of students within the EU. Questions have been raised concerning the feasibility of means-testing EU students, the difficulty of securing loan repayments for this category of students and, more generally, their position in relation to non-EU foreign students, who may be charged full-cost fees for studying in British higher education institutions. This has helped to bring to the fore the

specificity of the EU dimension with regard to the student constituency in British higher education institutions. The EU is also

relevant when it comes to the organisation and funding of research activities. For example, British higher education institutions have been encouraged by the government to recover and exceed the share of British funding that goes into the EU budget by taking an active part in successive EU research framework plans.

### **The Bologna process, a Europe-wide project but not an EU initiative**

Information about European issues in higher education is often relayed in the UK with an underlying eurosceptic slant rooted in the understanding that any voluntarist political approach to higher education is already problematic in any given national environment and can only be even more so when this voluntarism originates and is promoted at a European level. In fact, this approach is shared at EU level and is enshrined in the subsidiarity principle which informs EU policy and, in particular, matters related to education. The budget of the DG Education & Culture is comparatively small and the Commission's competence in educational matters is defined in Article 149 of the EU Treaty: "to contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between member states".

The Bologna process is neither an official programme, nor a project of the politico-economic entity known as the European Union. Anyone wishing to understand the subject from its inception to its current state of development must bear this in mind. The Bologna process is a non-binding inter-governmental initiative concerned with the establishment of higher education in which various countries and their governments - including the UK, though in this case it would be more accurate to refer to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since devolution - have decided independently to take part. Since the end of the 1990s, the process has developed through a series of high-profile meetings held in various European cities. Each meeting has produced a statement / declaration providing guidelines for the domestic reform agenda of the signatory parties (Corbett 2005). The Bologna process is therefore best understood as a multilateral European-based endeavour which is taking place in parallel to the building process of the EU as a politico-geographical entity. It may even be argued that the two processes are potentially antithetical or complementary depending on the relative balance of power between autonomous member states and the EU authorities (essentially the European Commission but also increasingly the European Parliament).

However, complementarities stand prominently on the agenda. The EU authorities - which themselves have for a long time developed their own initiatives in matters of higher education and research - have increasingly

endorsed and influenced the Bologna process. With the recent enlargement, a large proportion of the Bologna signatories are now part of the EU. The European Commission is represented in the Bologna follow-up group which provides guidance and information on the implementation of reforms. It also funds projects which are in line with Bologna priorities and cooperates with national authorities, academic and student networks and associations, with the European network for quality assurance in higher education and the network of national academic recognition information centres.

### **The Bologna process: myth or reality?**

It is often argued that more has been written on the Bologna process than has actually happened on the ground. This may have been true at the start of the process but reforms are now being implemented in a number of countries which show that the process is having a tangible impact on the organisation of higher education systems across the European area. For many universities in mainland Europe, the Bologna process is not perceived as an unlikely centralised reform concocted by the European bureaucracy. It has become a reality in that the higher education sector has been reorganised - often via a top-down process of public authority injunction - to take into account and implement the Bologna, Berlin and Bergen recommendations within the national structures. For example, throughout 2003/6 most French higher education institutions have had to reorganise their activities around the criteria set out in the Bologna process. Reforms have been implemented in Italy, Holland, and Germany. Other countries such as Spain are discussing the possible modalities of their implementation. Time's arrow does not allow us to determine whether these changes would have taken place without Bologna's guiding principles but it can be argued that they would not have been introduced as quickly if the reforms had had to follow traditional domestic bargaining and political processes.

The British Government was one of the first four signatories of the Sorbonne Declaration at the end of the 1990s (with France, Germany and Italy). However, any direct recognisable impact on British higher education seems to have stopped there as there has been little identifiable influence on reforms and practice, which have been driven more by a domestic and international - rather than simply European - agenda. The most recent Government White Paper on the future of higher education only mentioned the European dimension in matters of research funding and to indicate that EU students would pay differentiated, up-front tuition fees but would not get access to bursarships available to home students. The term 'Europe' was used a third time to indicate the need to recruit more full fee-paying non-EU foreign students (DFES 2003).

However, awareness of and engagement in the Bologna process has increased slightly since the Berlin ministerial summit in 2003. In January 2004, a sector-

wide UK Higher Education Europe Unit, funded by the UK Higher Education Funding Councils and Universities UK, was established to strengthen the position of British higher education in European policy-making processes. In consultation with a High Level Policy Forum, the Unit produces statements and lobbies accordingly. On the domestic front, the role of the European Unit is to inform and raise awareness among higher education stakeholders about European initiatives, European policies and the European reform agenda as well as to support and coordinate relevant actions. An increasing number of UK representatives are attending various European higher education gatherings. Since mid-2005, the UK has been at the head of the Secretariat to the Bologna Follow Up Group in charge of monitoring the process by providing information and news about its implementation and development until the next Ministerial Summit in London in May 2007.

### **How does Bologna's reform agenda fit into the UK's current situation?**

The first declaration in Bologna (1999) outlined six main areas of action for reforms in the European area of higher education: increasing the transparency of academic qualifications, harmonising higher education cycles (3 + 2), developing a European system of credit transfer and accumulation, reinforcing procedures and cross-national cooperation in quality assurance, increasing the mobility of students and academic staff and fostering the European dimension. The inter-ministerial meeting in Prague (2002) added lifelong learning and the international visibility and attractiveness of the European higher education area to this wish list of common directions. At the same time, stakeholders (higher education institutions, students) were encouraged to adopt a more proactive role. Renewed emphasis was placed on quality assurance to secure the mutual trust necessary to the reciprocal validation of studies. In order to speed up the harmonising process, the Berlin inter-ministerial meeting (2003) set short-term targets whereby signatory countries were to adopt a two-cycle + doctorate system (3+2+3). The central role of quality assurance mechanisms was reaffirmed.

### **Two cycles + doctorate (3+2+3)**

It may be argued that, in the main, the UK already has a two-cycle + doctorate system and is therefore not really concerned by this provision designed to harmonise the organisation of higher education to facilitate student mobility and the mutual recognition of diplomas. However, many Masters degrees in the UK last only one year. In England, there are also four-year courses which lead directly to a Masters qualification (e.g. MEng, MSci, MPhys, MChem) and in Scotland, there are four-year Bachelor's degrees with Honours and one-year Masters. A similar issue arises with the positioning of shorter higher education programmes (e.g. foundation degrees). The current debate on shorter, more intensive Bachelor's degrees lasting only two-years sits uneasily in the picture

too. This further illustrates the tensions at work between the domestic reform agenda and the European-wide concerted harmonisation process. In general, the UK position regarding these issues is that a diversified and flexible approach should be adopted and that higher education institutions should be free to set the duration of courses as they see fit in relation to their activities and environment (regional, national, European, international).

### **European Credit Transfer System**

There are regional arrangements for such credit transfer systems in Scotland and Wales, but English higher education institutions have adopted a more piecemeal approach (i.e. between specific programmes and/or institutions). A recent report has argued in favour of a common credit system for England, Wales and Northern Ireland higher education with a steering group of HE institutions and stakeholders considering how best to implement this recommendation (Burgess 2004). However, given the traditional organization of universities and degree courses in England, credit accumulation and transfer remains a controversial arrangement (HEPI 2004). It is therefore not surprising to find that the proposal to develop and implement such a system at European level has been met with strong reserves. The official UK position in this matter is that qualitative considerations (i.e. learning outcomes) more than quantitative ones (i.e. hours studied, estimated workload) should form the basis of mutual recognition of diplomas in the European higher education area (as is essentially the case at the moment). Most other countries and academic stakeholders share this position, which is why there has been a persistent emphasis on what could prove to be an even more controversial issue: the need to set up appropriate quality assurance mechanisms.

### **Quality assurance**

Quality assurance systems have been a Bologna concern from the outset as they have been considered to be a cornerstone in facilitating the mutual recognition of HE diplomas and eventually allowing for a qualification framework in the European higher education area. The Berlin ministerial summit in 2003 set out to accelerate the pace by insisting that internal assurance mechanisms be put in place. The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was given the task of fostering and facilitating the exchange of practice. National quality assurance systems were also encouraged. The European Commission has pushed strongly in this direction by recommending further steps in the direction of shared standards, procedures and guidelines. The idea is that there should eventually be a register of quality assurance and accreditation agencies at European level that would guarantee licensing and funding from EU member states. Higher education institutions would be able to choose which agency they want to operate with. These developments have alarmed the British

higher education sector, which is opposed to any intrusive quality assurance mechanisms at European level. This is why the Quality Assurance Agency has played a pro-active role in the quality assurance agenda within the Bologna process to explain and promote the British approach which is often combination of institution-led and promote the British approach which is often a combination of institution-led quality assurance followed by professionally accredited on-the-job training whereas in many European countries quality assurance is based on subject review and accreditation.

Quality assurance arrangements have always been a contentious domestic issue in UK higher education. It is therefore not surprising to see that concerns arise when the stakes are raised at European level. However, the UK higher education sector cannot afford to remain outside the European decision-making process in these matters as a significant part of the sector may find it difficult to remain immune from its influence.

### **International visibility**

These European initiatives may seem redundant to a British observer as British higher education institutions have been in the business of attracting foreign students since the beginning of the 1980s when the government decided that non-EU students would have to pay the real cost of their higher education in the UK. After experiencing a brief dip as potential international students were deterred by the cost of studying in the UK, recruitment started to increase again by the mid-1980s and has continued to increase since. Some British higher education institutions have become dependent on income from foreign students to a significant degree (HEPI 2006).

The recent Bologna initiatives echo steps taken by the European Commission to increase the international attractiveness of the European higher education area through the implementation of the Erasmus Mundus programme. For 2006/07, seven of the 21 Erasmus Mundus courses selected by the European Commission include a UK higher education institution - one as a coordinating institution and six as partner institutions. The total number of Erasmus Mundus courses with UK involvement is now 23. This shows that some British higher education institutions are not indifferent to the impetus coming from Brussels. Bearing this in mind, it may be argued that the UK sector has an interest in being 'lightly' embedded in a coherent European higher education area as it will enable institutions to enhance their European, thereby international, profile.

### **The Bologna process and the skills/performance agenda**

The overall aims of the Bologna process may be summarized in three key words: mobility, employability and competitiveness (UK HE Europe Unit 2005). It is therefore not surprising to see that many of the themes and initiatives

which have informed and guided the Bologna process are relevant to the skills, knowledge and organisational performance agenda. Furthermore, the Bologna process fits into the framework of the EU Lisbon objectives (2000-2010) for enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training and is in line with the 2002 Bruges-Copenhagen process involving 31 European countries in the introduction of common reference levels and a credit system for European vocational education and training.

The Bologna process provides an institutional forum for debating, networking and exchange of practice across Europe, which previously took place on an ad hoc basis. With Bologna we are clearly faced with an input-based approach to competences very similar to the one which has been favoured in England and in many European countries over the last decades. For example, the 2003 summit called for the elaboration of an overarching framework of qualifications for Europe with the signatory countries agreeing to establish national qualifications frameworks that would seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. The European Commission has recently set up an 'Expert Group on a European Qualifications Framework' to bring together the initiatives in both the Bologna and Bruges-Copenhagen Processes and produce a blueprint for a European qualifications framework. Such qualifications frameworks are not foreign to the UK situation, which already has several in place. For political, institutional and structural reasons, the Bologna process reinforces the trend for an input-based approach to competences, human capital and employment. Part of this input is also made of the experience of mobility which may be difficult to quantify but is certainly valuable.

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