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# Recognition issues and the Bologna Process: Changing paradigms

## Reflections from the perspective of the history of policy ideas

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## Introduction

Reconciliation matters have been a hot spot in relations between higher education systems, both in Europe and in other world regions. Higher education reforms, driven by European integration over the past three decades, have made such profound shifts in this area that we can truly speak of a paradigm shift. The analysis of this shift is at the heart of this study. Any paradigm shift requires time and occurs over a period of time; in this report, we will address the issue in a historical perspective, or more precisely, from the perspective of the history of ideas, especially the history of higher education policy ideas. In doing so, we will mainly focus on the recent period. In recent decades, Europe has witnessed a set of rather radical reforms of the entire national systems of higher education ("the Bologna Process"). These reforms are generally based on the formation of new concepts/ideas, which could help to better understand purposes, roles and functioning of the systems of higher education in thoroughly changed circumstances that characterize modern society – the knowledge society.

This field is extremely broad, so the focus of this study is deliberately narrowed down, especially to understanding the conditions and procedures for deciding on admission to studies for students and graduates who have completed prior studies (e.g. Master's) at an institution abroad. In the results, we want to contribute to drafting an explanatory note on the difference in paradigms between (a) admission based on *recognition of a foreign diploma as equivalent* to the national/institutional diploma that gives right of admission, and (b) admission based on *assessment of the competencies deemed necessary* to successfully complete a new programme (e.g. Master's).[1] This is, therefore, a paradigm shift, but this is not the first such case in the context of the issues with which we deal here. Moreover, this paradigm shift has not been yet – at least not entirely – implemented and operationalized in national systems and in institutions of higher education. This is a further important reason why this shift should be considered in the broader context of changes that befall higher education in recent decades.

In this report, we first attempt to show how the problem, with which we deal, was created. Establishment and development of *national* systems of higher education have led to *diverse* national qualifications systems. Structural and substantive differences between them have started to cause quite serious problems, e.g. for individuals who want to 'migrate' from system to system. From the 'liberal' times of the Middle Ages, when the differences between qualifications achieved in various European universities did not exist at all, we arrived in the 20th century to a completely opposite position. 'Nostrification', 'homologation', 'equivalence', 'recognition' are the three key concepts – or policy ideas – that show how the understanding of the problem of switching between systems changed over time. Parallel to changes in concepts the policy – and no less important – administrative procedures have also changed. Particularly intensive changes in ideas, concepts and policies have been brought about the end of the 20th century – during the period when *transnational* 'higher education area(s)' with *comparable and compatible* educational structures began to appear. This is a rough outline of the trajectory of this report.

[1] An important step forward in this area was made by the recently completed European "Mastermind" project; see https://mastermindeurope.eu/ (06/08/2018).

**Higher education: From 'liberal cosmopolitanism' to 'restrictive nationalism'**

In popular views it seems that 'internationalization' and 'globalization' (at this point we can't enter into an analysis of the differences between the two concepts) of higher education are entirely modern phenomena. Generally, it is customary in modern times to associate higher education systems with individual countries and their legislation. "Historians, however, inform us that the strong focus on higher education, coupled with relatively low levels of mobility, might have been temporary phenomena" (Teichler, 2009: 97). In specialized literature it is not difficult to read that in the Middle Ages, at the time of their birth and childhood, universities were '*international*' universities; they "delivered qualifications but they did not deliver qualifications considered as belonging to a national education system" (Bergan; in Bergan and Blomqvist, 2014: 31). "A specific feature of the medieval and early modern universities was the scholars' division, or rather grouping together, in corporations, known as 'nations'. [...] However, the *natio* of the medieval and early modern university did not have a national basis in the current sense of the term". In these universities, graduates "could rely on the fact that both first degrees and doctorates, for those who went on to sit the necessary examinations, would be recognised in their homeland" (Zonta; in Sanz and Bergan, 2002: 30–31). According to Neave (2002; see in Teichler 2009: 97), in the 17th century mobility in European countries "stood around ten percent". This is well above the current share of mobile students under the Erasmus programme, but less than half of what the European Ministers promised for 2020 (Bologna Process, 2010, pt.18).

When in the 19th century the European process of the formation of *nation-states* started – against a backdrop of increasingly rapid process of industrialization and radical changes in the political system – also the traits of character of traditional universities started to change radically. Thus, the protection of national borders, that is, the protection of national markets, also joined the safeguards that are concerned national education systems. On the other hand, States (in particular in the continental Europe) started to take both *financial and regulatory* responsibility for higher education, which they had not had before. When they had to regulate, they took the only framework they had at their disposal: the framework of the nation-state. Of course, this was not a wilful act of protectionism, but the side-effect of state-funding, which also promoted the growing diversity of national systems.

One of the crucial safeguards in the field of education was embodied in the regulations that determine the conditions under which 'foreign' candidates are taken to the 'home' universities or the conditions under which 'foreign' diplomas give the same or similar rights in the 'homeland'. Thus, in addition to border check-points, where it was required to show a valid passport to prove individual identity and the 'right to mobility', the *educational check-points* were formed at which it was required to prove the appropriate and/or acceptable *educational identity*. These major changes that have gradually taken place in the nineteenth century and completed in the twentieth century, were challenged by the new sweeping changes at the end of the twentieth century. With the progress of the European integration, and in particular with 'Schengen', the existing paradigm of education check-points has been confronted with a requirement of a radical change (Zgaga; in Bergan and Blomqvist, 2014: 20).

This is only a vaguely sketched general trend that defined the last two centuries; however, we can't ignore some of the details that have contributed to the problem, as it had to be addressed in the middle of the twentieth century. However, already in Europe of the 19th century, the relationship between diverse national educational systems was not the only problem to cope with at check-point stations. In the newly emerged national systems, the "access to the traditionally learned professions was linked to precise academic prerequisites, state examinations and standardized professional credentials" (F. Ringer; in Rüegg, 2004: 236). A typical feature of this (as well as later) period was to periodically *restrict the access*: "Recurrent crises of academic 'overproduction' [in the 19th century] thus tended at least temporarily to reduce the share of university entrants from the lower portions of the social scale" (ibid., 235).

Thus, *access* and *admission* were divorced. On the other hand, the *bureaucratisation of the education system* began to increase: "governments sought to establish national standards, particularly for pre-professional training in medicine and law, but also for the future arts or science teachers" (P. Gerbod; in Rüegg, 2004: 91). As a consequence, regulation in a country A could – and did – differ from regulation in a country B and, therefore, qualifications awarded by different 'national' universities began to be 'substantially different' if we paraphrase the key concept of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC, 1997; see below). The administrative and political – and even ideological – control over the universities greatly strengthened in the first half of the 20th century. By lowering the administrative borders between European countries at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, this control decreased importantly; nonetheless, differences between educational systems and higher education institutions haven't disappeared. On the contrary, the size of the problem has now been even further increased as mobility – both students, graduates and staff mobility – began to increase rapidly on both the regional and the global scale.

The idea of *education as a driver of social innovation* – the idea which belongs to the European Enlightenment (it put it in the forefront where it has remained until today) – has passed a complicated path through the last two centuries. An *'individualistic' understanding of education,* a view that was strongly engaged with the purposes of education, etc. and was characteristic for the (late) 18th century, was re-conceptualized into a *'national' education* in the 19th century; towards the end of the 20th century, it was re-conceptualized again – into a *'globalist'*[2] *education,* that is, the concept of education as characterized by the emerging global market.

The first two stages are well-researched today while the exploration of the third is ongoing. At the beginning of the twentieth century – in fact, during the cruellest period of World War 1 – John Dewey in his famous work *Education and Democracy* looked across the Atlantic and commented that in Europe "the new idea of importance of education for human welfare and

[2] Here we refer to Ulrich Beck (1997: 26) and his distinguishing between 'globalization' and 'globalism': "To me globalism is the view that the world market displaces or replaces political action; it is the ideology of world market power, the ideology of neoliberalism. This is a monocausal and economistic view which reduces the multi-dimensionality of globalisation to one dimension, the economic dimension".

progress was captured by national interests and harnessed to do a work whose social aim was definitely narrow and exclusive." On the other hand, "science, commerce, and art transcend national boundaries. They are largely international in quality and method." (Dewey, 2004 [1916]: 93) Dewey asks a question which reaches well beyond the horizons of his time: "This contradiction [...] between the wider sphere of associated and mutually helpful social life and the narrower sphere of exclusive and hence potentially hostile pursuits and purposes, exacts of educational theory a clearer conception of the meaning of 'social' as a function and test of education than has yet been attained. Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by the nation-state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained and corrupted?" (ibid.: 94).

His question is deeply challenging for our time as well, the time of 'globalism', but at this point we can't deal with this. At this point it is important to draw attention to a deep reflection on politics, "captured by national interests", "narrow and exclusive", which appeared after the end of World War 2. After two consecutive disasters, the necessity of some type of European integration became obvious. National and international conflicts do not only destroy the peace and material well-being, but restrict and prevent freedom of movement which is an essential aspect of culture, social cohesion and, last but not least, productivity. In this respect, education plays an extremely important role. Soon after the war a hope was raised on both sides of the Atlantic[3] that a stay abroad could enhance *international understanding* (Altbach and Teichler, 2001). In Europe after the World War II, institutions and structures were also founded "that would prevent, or at least lessen, the more terrible consequences of international competition and conflict while promoting cultural, scientific, social and economic co-operation as means to advance peace, understanding and well-being" (Hunt, in Bergan and Blomqvist, 2014:176-177).

## Towards 'Europeanisation' of higher education

When the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed "that Franco-German production of coal and steel as a whole be placed under a common High Authority, within the framework of an organisation open to the participation of the other countries of Europe" and "as a first step in the federation of Europe" (Schuman Declaration, 1950), the wheels of history began to turn in a new direction. This applies not only to the industry but also to such 'soft' segments of society such as education. This trend can be traced at least since the setting up of the Council of Europe in 1949 to reinforce the democratic systems and the human rights. Further, the *European Convention of Human Rights* (1950) in particular, "laid the foundation for subsequent developments in cultural, social, labour and educational reforms across Europe" (Hunt, E.S. in Bergan and Blomqvist, 2014: 176-177).

[3] For example, in 1947, the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies (the 'Marshall Plan of the Mind') was founded by a Harvard graduate student Clemens Heller in an old and ruined castle in Salzburg (Austria) as an international forum for those seeking a better future for Europe and the world. It is the seat of now widely known *Salzburg Global Seminar*. This is an example from a micro level; on the other – macro – level, in 1948 the famous US *Fulbright program* was established.

It is true that one can find only one reference with regard to education in the *European Convention of Human Rights*, but this one is really fundamental: "No person shall be denied the right to education" (Article 2). The stipulation can be interpreted at different levels; one of these levels is that the right to education includes the right of access to education and the right to recognition of educational achievements and diplomas. The *European Cultural Convention* (ECC) of 1954 – a fundamental document which has served as the basis for co-operation in the areas of education, culture and sports within the Council of Europe – strengthened this position: the Contracting Parties committed themselves each to "encourage the study by its own nationals of the languages, history and civilisation of the other Contracting Parties" and to "endeavour to promote the study of its language or languages, history and civilisation in the territory of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to the nationals of those Parties to pursue such studies in its territory" (ECC, 1954, Article 2). Compared with the preceding period of history, which ended in 1945, these were very big steps in a new direction. On this basis, the Council of Europe already in the 1950s passed three important conventions in the field of equivalence of diplomas and recognition of qualifications: (a) the *European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas leading to Admission to Universities* was opened for signature in 1953, (b) the *European Convention on the Equivalence of Periods of University Study* in 1956 and (c) the *European Convention on the Academic Recognition of University Qualifications* in 1959.

If we observe today these documents in a retrograde perspective, it would be difficult to argue that they had deep and immediate practical impact across Europe. However, they certainly had an indirect impact. In the first decades after the war they help to facilitate – politically as well as conceptually – the process of preparing and adopting of a long list of bilateral agreements in which individual countries – often neighbours or countries with closely related education systems – agreed on 'equivalence' of their study programmes and diplomas. The Council of Europe Conventions of the 1950s undoubtedly contributed to highlighting the importance of equivalence between study programmes at European universities (Deloz, 1986). However, at that time, Europe as a whole faced with a problem which didn't allow concluding an effective pan-European multilateral convention: the continent was divided into competing blocs – and bilateral agreements were generally not concluded beyond bloc and ideological borders;[4] on the contrary, they were mainly 'intra-bloc' agreements. As was also the mobility predominantly 'intra bloc' mobility...

It is likely that these conventions indirectly affected the UNESCO to begin – about ten years later – preparing a similar convention at the global level. "The aim turned out to be too

[4] Of course, there were also a few exemptions; for example, the agreement between Yugoslavia on the one hand, and Austria and Italy on the other. Within the ('non-aligned') Yugoslavian federation, Slovenia – a neighbour of Austria and Italy; the border areas have been bilingual – was particularly interested in these agreements. Two agreements with Austria (on the equivalence of certificates of final exams for secondary schools; on equivalence in the university sector) were concluded in 1976 and 1980, and two with Italy (on the recognition of the final secondary school certificates for admission to universities and colleges; on the recognition of diplomas and titles obtained at universities and colleges) in 1971 and 1983. Since then, times have changed – ideological barriers have fallen and systems of recognition have modernized. However, from a legalistic point of view, all four agreements are still valid today; see http://www.arhiv.mvzt.gov.si/fileadmin/mvzt.gov.si/pageuploads/doc/dokumenti_visokosolstvo/priznavanje/sporazumi.pdf (10/10/2018).

ambitious, and UNESCO turned to the promotion of regional cooperation in this respect. This has led to various regional conventions, among them by the States of the Europe Region in 1979" (Teichler, 2009: 8). Like the Conventions of the fifties, "the UNESCO Convention has had very little impact on everyday recognition practice within the Europe Region": it was mainly designed as "a political instrument for contacts between two opposed blocs" of the time (Kouwenaar, 1994: 20).

The UNESCO *Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the Europe Region* was adopted in December 1979 and accompanied by similar documents in other world regions (e.g. 1978 in the Arab States; 1981 in the African States; 1983 in Asia and the Pacific). Despite the fact that it had no direct impact on the daily practice it has been undoubtedly another step forward: a step towards the creation of such international document such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe jointly developed in the 1990s – the *Lisbon Recognition Convention* (1997). But the goal was still quite far and not yet clearly defined; it was necessary to consider some important conceptual dilemmas.

What were these dilemmas? One of them concerned the relationship between the recognition *outcomes* (a theme that was directly of interest to politics as to the general public) and recognition *process* (an issue that was related to a number of 'devils in the details'). "All Conventions of the Council of Europe share a focus on *recognition outcomes a*s the main subject of agreement." However, "the phrasing of the *recognition outcomes* is rather vague and gives wide scope for evasive interpretations and superficial or absent implementation". On the other hand, the UNESCO Convention of 1979 was "a positive step in another direction: that of a focus on the *recognition process* as the subject of international agreement. Not only does the UNESCO Convention explicitly take *recognition* as its basic concept, it mentions various aspects of the *recognition process* by which international agreement will lead to better results in *recognition outcomes*" (Kouwenaar, 1994: 20). According to another author, the Convention "advocated flexible criteria for the evaluation of equivalences, suggested improvements be made to the exchange of information regarding recognition, and encouraged the national authorities to recognise professional credentials as well, without, however, calling for a clear professional recognition" (Teichler, 2009: 8). These were significant steps forward, but soon it became clear that the mountains are high.

In the 1980s, new and important changes in European higher education systems had begun to appear. On one hand, these changes were the result of global trends – for example, massification and internationalization, the emerging knowledge society and economy, etc.; on the other hand, they were also the result of 'regional' processes – European integration process was experiencing a new rise. A new player in the field of higher education emerged – the European Communities (EC), the ancestor of today's European Union. Indeed, responsibility over (higher) education systems has remained in the hands of national governments because education in general has been treated 'an area of high national sensitivity'. Nevertheless, new and original competences have started to appear at trans-governmental level: "Europe of knowledge" has been already born (Corbett, 2005) and the process of *'Europeanisation' of higher education* began. Thus, lowering the borders between the EC/EU Member States and the development of the single market has brought, for example, the first ideas on mutual recognition of diplomas for professional purposes. Already around 1970, the idea of "some

‘harmonising’ of conditions of entry to institutions of higher education in order to encourage academic mobility” emerged (Corbett, 2005: 60). However, it was still early and from the perspective of that time, “harmonization of the European educational system and of its structures and contents as a whole appears to be neither realistic nor necessary” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 5).

But the process has been progressing very fast. At the beginning of the 1980s topics such as reciprocal arrangements for the exchange of students between institutions, as a way round the problems posed by national selective mechanisms – competitive entry, *numerus clausus*, etc. have been already discussed within the Council of Education Ministers (Corbett, 2005: 107). Mobility became one of the most important objectives of EC educational cooperation. In an EC white paper of mid-1980s, the Commission promised “to increase its support for cooperation programmes between further education establishments in the different Member States, with a view to promoting the mobility of students, facilitating the academic recognition of degrees and diplomas, and helping young people [...] to think in European terms.” The Paper promised that new proposals will be made on this subject until the end of 1985, “notably concerning a Community scholarship scheme of grants for students wishing to pursue part of their studies or the acquisition of relevant professional experience in another Member State” (Commission, 1985: 26). In 1987, *ERAMUS programme* was born; it marked a new era in the ‘Europeanisation’ of higher education: “For the first time full Community authority was being exercised for higher education cooperation, with the agreement of Member States.” (Corbett, 2005: 145)

From the beginning of the new student exchange scheme, grants have been conditioned by *full academic recognition*. Thus, the ERASMUS programme brought a wealth of new challenges also in the field of academic recognition. In this case, the issue is neither recognition of entry conditions for studies nor recognition of degrees, because student mobility is mainly limited to one semester. Nevertheless, the ERASMUS programme opened some almost totally new questions and some very interesting debates which mainly targeted to a more precise treatment of individual issues. In a report on early years of the new programme Ulrich Teichler suggested “that a *limitation* [should] *be imposed on the inflationary use of the term recognition*” and, on the other hand, that “the *variety and serious nature of obstacles to recognition*” is systematically considered (Teichler, 1990: 46). Higher education institutions resorted to different recognition strategies that can even counteract one to another. Teichler’s classifications identify four meanings of the term recognition and no less than seven diverse approaches to recognition (see ibid.: 8-11 and 24-28). Thus, a new feature called “*short mobility within Europe*” has intensified ongoing discussion on the academic recognition and brought new dimension into it.

The ERAMUS programme was still in quite gentle childhood when it was joined by another programme devoted to international higher education cooperation within Europe at large (‘beyond the EC’) and to the exchange of students and staff – TEMPUS (the trans-European mobility scheme for university studies, adopted by the Council of EU in 1990). TEMPUS was the result of European political tectonic changes at the turn of the 1980s to 1990s, but it was also one of the causes of the thoroughly revised European higher education landscape since 1990.

**Lisbon Recognition Convention: the 'recognition paradigm shift'**

The period after the Second World War marked the European higher education systems by growing diversity. At the end of the 1960s, higher education started to gradually turn from its 'elite' to 'mass' stage. Secondly, 'non-university' institutions started to grow and expand in many countries. Third, within the systems, which were traditionally composed of state universities, private institutions have begun to emerge. Fourth, international and mobile students were increasingly common everywhere. It is true that there were some significant differences between Eastern and Western European systems and institutions until the 1990s, but if we ignore their ideological backgrounds general trends were quite similar.

By the end of the 1980s, the general social and political context has changed dramatically across Europe. The process that began with the democratic changes in Greece and continued in Portugal and Spain in the 1970s, was completed at the turn of the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe. The conditions that determined the Council of Europe's Conventions of the 1950s and the UNESCO's Convention of the 1970s – when the bloc confrontation reached its peak – suddenly changed, completely and irreversibly. "The fact that many more countries could all of a sudden accede to the conventions made it urgent to revise them" (Bergan, in Bergan and Blomqvist, 2014: 34).

But this was only the 'external circumstances' which dictated a new step in this area. As we have already partly indicated, the changes were dictated by the conceptual development – i.e., the 'internal circumstances' of the regulatory framework and practices of recognition of higher education qualifications. At the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the LRC Sjur Bergan explained these reasons as follows: a new text was the best alternative because there were several conventions, each of which would have had to be updated. Next, the old texts were conceived at the end of an age of elite education and now needed to be applied to mass education. Growing diversification of and within higher education – e.g. university and non-university institutions, public and private sector, young and lifelong learners, etc. - was the next reason, the emergence of the so-called free movers in parallel to those participating in organized mobility programmes was the fourth, etc. (ibid., 34-35).

It took five years that the new convention was adopted. In 1992, the Council of Europe and UNESCO agreed to draw up a proposal for a new joint convention. First, a feasibility study was carried out, which emphasized profound changes in the structure and functioning of higher education systems. Not only that academic mobility has increased rapidly, but it also changed its characteristics: particularly noticeable was the increase in 'short mobility' (e.g. Erasmus), which opened a new issue of recognition of (short) 'periods of study'. In preparation of the proposal attention was also given to the new instrument, which originated precisely at that time but outside preparatory work for a new Convention – the European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS). A similar innovation was the Diploma Supplement (DS), which was established by the new Convention.

*Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region* (Lisbon Recognition Convention – LRC) was adopted at a diplomatic conference in Lisbon in April 1997. Its key innovation hasn't been instrumental but conceptual. On the one hand, the conceptual novelty lies in terminological distinguishing between 'access' and 'admission' – i.e., an applicant is first considered qualified for 'admission' and then actually 'admitted' (or not). On the other hand, the Convention established a shift from determining the *equivalence* (in many countries the term *nostrification* – to make the qualification 'our' – has been used) to the *recognition of higher education qualifications*. With the previous Conventions it was common practice that implementation was made through bilateral agreements, which contained lists of individual degrees and titles, which shall be mutually recognized in the two signatory countries. New conceptual basis constituted a radical departure from such a philosophy; this basis is grasped in the term of *the substantial difference*:

Each Party shall recognise the qualifications issued by other Parties meeting the general requirements for access to higher education in those Parties for the purpose of access to programmes belonging to its higher education system, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the general requirements for access in the Party in which the qualification was obtained and in the Party in which recognition of the qualification is sought (LRC 1997, Article IV.1).

Therefore, the new Convention was built on a number of new principles; one of most important is that the 'burden of proof' is "not on the applicant but on the competent authority" (Bergan, in Bergan and Blomqvist, 2014: 36), that "the rights of the applicant for recognition, in principle, outweighed the interests in any host country for limiting or denying that recognition" (Hunt, in Bergan and Blomqvist, 2014: 179). It also brought a provision on recognition of qualifications held by refugees or displaced persons. Even in these terms the 'spirit of the nineties' is reflected: hope for the expansion of democracy and freedom, but also dealing with conflicts and the problems they bring. The substantive significance of the innovations introduced by the LRC is presented by Kees Kouwenaar in his section of this report, so that this doesn't need to be repeated here again. At this point, let us just emphasize again that the LRC has contributed a paradigm shift, which has far-reaching implications not only for understanding the issues of access and admission to higher education (e.g. to the Master's studies), but is associated with much wider and deeper changes that were initiated in European higher education at the turn of the millennium.

Therefore, we will now put the implementation of LRC in a broader context. This context deserves special attention. With a little exaggeration it could be said that the LRC was a kind of overture to the Bologna Process; within the process the recognition issues as well as issues of access and admission have been put under a new light. With the LRC, the 'paradigm shift' has not yet ended. LRC has only announced a time of great changes in the field of higher education policies.

The LRC entered into force in February 1999, after it was ratified by the first five countries. Many other countries followed their example, but soon a relative stagnation appeared and in the following years there have been many calls that the signatory countries should speed up the ratification process. Six years after the adoption, in July 2003, 33 signatory countries ratified

the Convention; however, there were also 11 signatures not followed by ratifications yet. The reason for the slow pace of the ratification process has been generally in really complex and diverse national legislation;[5] this fact also points to the complexity of the conditions in which the idea of a *common European Higher Education Area* was born and began to grow up.

**The Bologna Process: towards a broader "paradigm shift"**

The idea of a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in May 1998 was formally promoted by four education ministers – of France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom – at a conference dedicated to the eight hundred anniversary of the University of Paris. Ministers stressed that a common area "carries a wealth of positive perspectives, of course respecting our diversities, but requires on the other hand continuous efforts to remove barriers and to develop a framework for teaching and learning, which would enhance mobility and an ever closer cooperation" (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998).

Therefore, their main aim was to urge and invite ministers from other European countries to join the initiative: "Progressive harmonisation of the overall framework of our degrees and cycles can be achieved through strengthening of already existing experience, joint diplomas, pilot initiatives, and dialogue with all concerned". The document does not go into details, but at a fairly general level envisages, for example, a "system, in which two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, should be recognized for international comparison and equivalence" and that "students should be able to enter the academic world at any time in their professional life and from diverse backgrounds". Further, in the last part of the Declaration, the ministers wrote: "A convention, recognising higher education qualifications in the academic field within Europe, was agreed on last year in Lisbon. The convention set a number of basic requirements and acknowledged that individual countries could engage in an even more constructive scheme. Standing by these conclusions, one can build on them and go further. There is already much common ground for the mutual recognition of higher education degrees for professional purposes through the respective directives of the European Union" (ibid.).

All the then Member States of the EU and the EFTA as well as the ten associated countries which were preparing to join EU in 2004, responded to the initiative. This led to the first conference of the Bologna Process, which took place in Bologna in June 1999. The Bologna Declaration reconfirmed "the general principles laid down in the Sorbonne declaration" but did not go into any content detail on a "common area". Of course, it was a political document, which first of all confirmed the commitment of 29 European countries (European Commission participated only as a guest) to address the necessary – far-reaching and complex – reform of higher education *together*:

> The course has been set in the right direction and with meaningful purpose. The achievement of greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher

5 An extreme example is Greece, where the Constitution limits the recognition of qualifications awarded outside the Greek public higher education sector. Therefore, European educational reform may also encounter extremely demanding tasks, such as changing the national Constitution.

> education nevertheless requires continual momentum in order to be fully accomplished. We need to support it through promoting concrete measures to achieve tangible forward steps. (Bologna Declaration, 1999)

Interestingly, the declaration does not mention the issue of the recognition of higher education qualifications at all. The vision of a common EHEA can be mainly identified through six objectives (the so-called "Bologna action lines") and from our point of view, the first two are especially important:

> - Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens' employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system.
> - Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries. (Ibid.)

In these two objectives the idea of a *single area* is already reflected; an area which will be based on such common standards that will allow for "comparability and compatibility" (ibid.) of hitherto significantly different national higher education systems and will also allow "for validation of [...] acquired credits for those who choose initial or continued education in different European universities and wish to be able to acquire degrees in due time throughout life" (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). In rough lines both declarations have pencilled a vision of a common space in which diverse national systems should be connected by 2010. The envisaged EHEA will be marked by great flexibility; it will encourage inter-institutional and international mobility, such as we have never had, and it will significantly facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications thus opening new opportunities for access and admission to higher education at any of the three main cycles.

Thus, the broad-based and multi-annual task was set up. Over the first period, it was necessary primarily to respond to the many details – and many devils in these details – which the initial broad vision, of course, could not even tackle. This period lasted mainly until 2005, when the fundamental conceptual basis for the emerging EHEA drawn and agreed upon. This was a real 'paradigm shift' period. In Bologna, it was also agreed that the conceptual development will be coordinated by a special working group (BFUG) and that every two years Ministerial Conference will be organized to check the results and to confirm the arrangements on specific issues.

The first of these conferences was held in Prague in 2001. There were quite extensive preparations for the conference – both in several working groups, appointed by the BFUG, as well as events organized by the so-called consultative members (the Council of Europe, EUA and ESIB; the circle of consultative members was later extended). Among other things, a lot of energy was invested to discussing the new Bachelor-Master system: the more details entered the Bologna agenda, the more it became clear that this issue is for many countries on the

European continent accounted for tough, because it meant quite a radical departure from traditional systems. Criticisms of the old systems mostly stressed that high drop-out rates and the lengthening of university studies (at a time when higher education was passing in its "mass stage", both were identified as the key problem of traditional higher education systems) were among the main characteristics of the "long first study cycle". In addition, it was recognised that there is considerable lack of comparability between national systems. In result, the recognition of qualifications – as well as of study periods – was made quite difficult and mobility was restricted.

"The bachelor-master (two-tier) structure offers several advantages in comparison with the [old] long, often rather inflexible curricula leading straight up to the master level" (Bologna Process, 2001), was noted in the conclusions and recommendations of a seminar on Bachelor-level degrees, which was (as one of the first so-called *Bologna Seminars*)[6] organized in Helsinki in February 2001. The document continued: "The bachelor/master structure has become a world standard. Its adoption will facilitate better recognition of European degrees both within Europe and in the world and will make it more attractive for international students to consider studying in Europe". It was also clear to participants that "[r]eforming structures only is not enough. Transparency and comparability of transferable core competencies expected from graduates of bachelor and master programmes in broad subject areas are needed at the European level." The seminar was looking for a common denominator for the definition of Bachelor-level degrees and came to the conclusion that it should take "normally three to four years of full-time study to complete the degree". This was just the start of a challenging debate, which achieved the first milestone four years later when the framework of qualifications for the EHEA was adopted. Until there, it was still a long way to go.

The Prague Conference has not been able to do much in this direction; the Bologna Process was still dealing with its establishment. In very general terms, the ministers could only undertake "to take full advantage of existing national legislation and European tools aimed at facilitating academic and professional recognition of course units, degrees and other awards" (Bologna Process, 2001b), which was at a given moment only possible. In addition, they emphasized that "the adoption of common cornerstones of qualifications, supported by a credit system such as the ECTS [...] is necessary" (ibid.). In order to take the process further, they encouraged the BFUG to arrange seminars to explore a number of strategic areas, e.g. quality assurance, recognition issues, joint degrees, obstacles to mobility, etc., and in particular, a common framework of qualifications for the EHEA.

**From recognition issues to a common framework of qualifications**

The agenda for the period between 2001 and 2005 was very intense; at that time a series of new conceptual solutions was developed. Among the many official Bologna Seminars and similar events from that period, we will mention only a few, which are closely related to our topic. Thus, the relationship between the spirit of the LRC and ideas on a common EHEA prompted

[6] Under the Bologna Process the "official Bologna Seminars" have been main events dedicated to the expert discussing individual thematic issues prioritized within a biannual plan.

an intensive debate on the recognition issues. To mark the fifth anniversary of the LRC, a Bologna Seminar was held in Lisbon in April 2002 to outline how improving the recognition of qualifications can contribute to establishing the EHEA. At this occasion, Sjur Bergan made an interesting note on the relationship mentioned above: "while the Lisbon Recognition Convention was adopted and even entered into force before the movement started towards a European Higher Education Area, it anticipated a number of issues that have become key parts of the Bologna Process" (Bergan, 2003: 35), in particular issues like e.g. the fair recognition of qualifications, transparency, quality assurance and institutional recognition, etc. He also stressed that "[t]hrough the Bologna Process, the recognition of qualifications has moved from being considered as a side-issue for technical specialists to the heart of the higher education debate" (ibid., 40).

This way, a lively debate on the *recognition and learning outcomes* has begun – for the first time at such a broad level, not only in a circle of "technical specialists". The participants of this seminar reached general agreement on a need for a "framework in which learning outcomes can be described and assessed" (Purser, in Bergan, 2003: 26). In summary of the conclusions and recommendations from the seminar Lewis Purser wrote:

Learning outcomes are important for recognition, since the basis for recognition procedures is in the process of shifting from quantitative criteria, such as the length and type of courses studied, to the outcomes reached and competencies obtained during these studies. The principal question asked of the student or graduate will therefore no longer be 'what did you do to obtain your degree?' but rather 'what can you do now that you have obtained your degree?'" (Ibid.)

This topic was, on the other side, closely connected to the debate on the so-called *structural dimension of the Bologna Process*:[7] this was a popular term for complex tasks that were identified in the Bologna Declaration as the "adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees essentially based on two main cycles". A series of seminars and other events was reserved to discuss how to establish a *common denominator*, i.e., a unified structure for the emerging EHEA. The main focus was initially intended at two cycles, Bachelor and Master. In further discussion, concerns have been expressed that these terms could provoke confusion both in countries that have traditionally used them and in those that haven't. Above, we have already mentioned the conclusions of the seminar in Helsinki in 2001; this agreement was now reconfirmed but the debate went more in depth, stressing that concerns for *learning outcomes* and qualification are even more important than *length of study* (i.e., 3 to 4-year). Ongoing discussion about level descriptors, learning outcomes and qualification frameworks opened a whole new systemic chapter that proved later vital for the success of the Process.

After 2001, attention gradually turned from Bachelor to the composition of the "Bologna second cycle" (Master) and a new seminar on this topic was held in March 2003, again in Helsinki. It was noted that some disciplines (particularly in countries with traditionally long one-cycle programmes) require a different scheme and the notion of an "integrated Master" degree (5-year) occurred in discussions. A tendency could also be identified at that time to treat

[7] In addition to the "structural" dimensions we can still talk about the "social" (i.e., the social situation of students) and "external" (relations to higher education systems outside Europe) dimensions of the Bologna Process.

first-cycle degrees only as a "stepping-stone" or "orientation platform" for the second-cycle degrees – and not as an end in itself, "relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification" as envisaged by the Bologna Declaration. Diversification academic vs. professional second-cycle degrees was not disputed but the importance to change *approaches to learning* was stressed: learning should not be expressed in traditional terms of *seating-time* but in terms of *learning outcomes and study credits* gained.

In this context, considerable attention was given to the issue of *access*: in principle, entrance to second-cycle degree study programmes should be made possible without additional requirements, but actual admission should remain the responsibility of the institutions offering second-cycle degrees. Bachelor and Master should have differently defined outcomes; they should be described on the basis of content, quality and learning outcomes, not only according to formal characteristics. A strong need for a "frame of reference for Master degrees in Europe" was exposed and it was noted that "various initiatives are already underway that aim at defining learning outcomes, skills and competences". It was believed that these trends may have contributed to creation of European profiles in various disciplines (Zgaga, 2003, pt. 66).

From here on, the process took place on two horizons; between them, there was good communication, which certainly contributed to a sharp conceptual development in this period. On the one hand, a "central" Bologna working group was appointed by the BFUG to prepare a draft qualifications framework. One of the most important milestones along this way was another Bologna Seminar which was organized in Copenhagen, also in March 2003. After this event it became clear that the central focus moved from a general issue of the two-tier structure to more specific issues: descriptors, levels, generic vs. subject-specific competences, workload, credits, learning outcomes, etc. The adoption of a common two-tier system looked now just as a first step on a long and winding road towards EHEA. The work has been now diverted towards a deeper level of transparency regarding the types, principles, levels and purposes behind different national qualifications and their place in a common, "overarching framework". This work was accomplished in 2005 when the Bergen Ministerial Conference adopted the proposal submitted by the working group (Zgaga, 2003, pt. 68; see also below).

On the other hand, there were several independent initiatives that dealt with various aspects of the *structural dimension* and contributed detailed but important insights. One of them was the so-called *Joint Quality Initiative* (JQI). This was an informal network of 11 countries launched soon after the Prague Summit (Maastricht, September 2001) with the task of examining the possibility of common standards for quality assurance and accreditation of Bachelor and Master programmes in Europe with an aim to *strengthen transparency of higher education provision in international context*. The most interesting contributions from this initiative are descriptors of Bachelor and Master programmes; draft descriptors were formulated at the group's Dublin workshop (February 2002), therefore they are known today as the *Dublin descriptors*. The JQI group was later, until 2004, working closely together with the BFUG appointed working group on qualifications framework. The advanced Dublin Descriptors were adopted in 2005 as the cycle descriptors for the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area with the following argumentation: "They offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle" (Bologna Process, 2005a: 9).

In this way yet another step forward towards a new understanding of transparency in higher education in an international context had been made. This was one of the central issues at the "macro" level of the Bologna Process (the "structural dimension"). Of course, there was also a "micro" level with its specific problems. In the ongoing debate, warnings have been heard that there is a danger of only superficial implementation of the new degree structures, and that systemic encouragement should be given to strengthen attempts to *renew curricula at the institutional level*. "Macro" level had to be coupled with "micro" level: as soon as this was done, it was clear that a general statement that there should be "a system essentially based on two main cycles" is insufficient to make real degrees as awarded by universities comparable and compatible on a European level (Zgaga, 2003, pt. 67). It was necessary, therefore, to look at the institutional level.

Also at the level of higher education institutions, the early 2000s was a time of many experimentation and innovation. The Socrates program of the European Union has supported many of them. Within our topic the *Tuning project* can't be overlooked: it is the largest and most influential and still in operation; it is "Universities' contribution to the Bologna Process"[8] It was established in summer 2000 by a large group of universities (co-ordinated by the University of Deusto, Spain and the University of Groningen, The Netherlands) "to offer a concrete approach to implement the Bologna Process at the level of higher education institutions and subject areas" (González and Wagenaar, 2003, 9).

*Tuning* addressed several action lines of the Process, notably the adoption of a system of readable and comparable degrees, the establishment of a system of credits, quality issues, etc. From the outset it has been marked by the "spirit of Bologna", which is summarized at the project website as follows:

The name *Tuning* has been chosen for the project to reflect the idea that universities do not look for harmonisation of their degree programmes or any sort of unified, prescriptive or definitive European curricula but simply for points of reference, convergence and common understanding. The protection of the rich diversity of European education has been paramount in the Tuning project from the very start and the project in no way seeks to restrict the independence of academic and subject specialists, or damage local and national academic authority.

However, its first and most important contribution has been at "micro" level: in designing, testing and implementing an appropriate methodology to identify points of reference for generic and subject-specific competences in various subject areas (e.g. in the first phase Business Administration, Chemistry, Education Sciences, European Studies, History, Earth Sciences, Mathematics, Nursing and Physics; this list was later extended) and in all cycles. The starting point of the project was the idea that competences describe learning outcomes: what a learner knows or is able to do after completing a learning process. This concerns both subject specific competences and generic competences. Competences are understood as "points of reference" for curriculum design and evaluation; they allow flexibility and autonomy in the

[8] See http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/.

construction of curricula. Descriptions of competences also provide a common language for describing what curricula are aiming at. A more general ambition of *Tuning* was to become a platform for the exchange of experience and knowledge among European countries, higher education institutions and staff with regard to the implementation of the Bologna process at Europe-wide level (Zgaga, 2003, pt. 36).

Today, we can only conclude that the project fully realized its ambitions and even surpassed them with its subsequent operation in different regions of the world (Latin America, the US, Russia, Central Asia, China, Africa, etc.). Thus, the Tuning project remains also today one of the main references in the modernization of curricula and study at the level of higher education institutions. At the same time, it also made important implications at the level of the "structural dimension".

**"Realising the European Higher Education Area"**

Between Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005) conferences, the "structural dimension" has been developed in a number of details. In these details, the "paradigm shift" that occurred in the European higher education during the 1990s and 2000s is well reflected. The spirit that permeated the preparation of the LRC continued in the Bologna Process. At the beginning of the 2000s, Andrejs Rauhvargers noted that "while the main accent at learning outcomes rather than duration of studies and other input characteristics was fully acknowledged in the Lisbon Recognition Convention and especially in its subsidiary texts, until recently there were very few attempts in Europe to start describing qualifications in terms of learning outcomes" (Rauhvargers, 2004: 344). However, efforts within the BFUG to develop a framework of qualifications, together with initiatives like those of the Joint Quality Initiative and the Tuning, thoroughly reversed the situation: "the 'new type' description of qualifications through level, workload, learning outcomes, and profile, provides exactly that information about qualifications that was missing so far and that allows to find out how a foreign qualification can be used in the context of the host country" (ibid.).

On the other side, important policy decisions were taken during this period and they can be well monitored through communiqués of the ministerial conferences of the last decade. Thus, the Berlin conference has already established important developments with regard to the basic "Bologna action lines": a simple formulation of "adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles" from the Bologna Declaration was upgraded in the idea of transparent national qualifications systems, based on common denominator – the overarching framework of qualifications for the EHEA. Ministers agreed to elaborate at the national level a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.

Within such frameworks, degrees should have different defined outcomes. First and second cycle degrees should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. First cycle degrees should give

access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes. Second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies.

> [...] Ministers stress their commitment to making higher education equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means (Bologna Process, 2003).

Further conceptual and policy development was really running fast. Two years later, in Bergen, ministers adopted "the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA,[9] comprising three cycles [...], generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles". Further on, they committed themselves "to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010" and asked "the Follow-up Group to report on the implementation and further development of the overarching framework" (Bologna Process, 2005b). This position was further strengthened at the London Conference - and the "way back" was now no longer possible:

> Qualifications frameworks are important instruments in achieving comparability and transparency within the EHEA and facilitating the movement of learners within, as well as between, higher education systems. They should also help higher education institutions to develop modules and study programmes based on learning outcomes and credits, and improve the recognition of qualifications as well as all forms of prior learning (Bologna Process, 2007, pt. 2.7).

In addition to these important conceptual breakthroughs and strategic policy decisions quite practical results were also achieved, such as the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, designed in the LRC in 1997. Ministers gathered in Berlin agreed, inter alia, "that every student graduating as from 2005 should receive the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge" and that it "should be issued in a widely spoken European language". This position was a subject of some disagreement in particular by the higher education institutions, as it required a lot of practical work. In addition, ministers appealed "to institutions and employers to make full use of the Diploma Supplement, so as to take advantage of the improved transparency and flexibility of the higher education degree systems, for fostering employability and facilitating academic recognition for further studies" (Bologna Process, 2003). Therefore, in the context of the Bologna Process the provisions of the LRC have also been gradually enforced. Nevertheless, at the Bergen Conference ministers noted that only "36 of the 45 participating countries have now ratified" it (Bologna Process, 2005b) and two more years later, they numbered 38 countries (Bologna Process, 2007). The path of the Bologna Process was more winding than it seems today.

However, 2010 as "the passage from the Bologna Process to the EHEA" (Bologna Process 2007, pt. 3.7), was inexorably approaching and at the last conference before the final declaration of the EHEA, the "abstract" vision from 1999 was already outlined in quite concrete contours:

[9] See Bologna Process, 2005a.

> The Bologna Process is leading to greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher education and is making it easier for learners to be mobile and for institutions to attract students and scholars from other continents. Higher education is being modernized with the adoption of a three-cycle structure including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications linked to the first cycle and with the adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance. We have also seen the creation of a European register for quality assurance agencies and the establishment of national qualifications frameworks linked to the overarching European Higher Education Area framework, based on learning outcomes and workload. Moreover, the Bologna Process has promoted the Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System to further increase transparency and recognition (Bologna Process, 2009, pt. 6).

However, when at the 2010 Conference the ministers solemnly proclaimed that the EHEA has become a reality, they also noted in the new declaration the following: "While much has been achieved in implementing the Bologna reforms, the reports also illustrate that EHEA action lines such as degree and curriculum reform, quality assurance, recognition, mobility and the social dimension are implemented to varying degrees" (Bologna Process, 2010).

## Conclusion

Over the past eight years there have been many calls and a lot of efforts to "implement the principles of the Bologna process fully and as soon as possible". However, despite such calls some questions remain open, but new times also bring new issues, among them many have so far not been on the agenda. It seems that the today's problem is not so much in "full implementation of the already agreed principles" (Zgaga, 2012: 32) but in the fact that it is necessary to confront and deal also with new questions posed by the new era. A reflection of the "paradigm shift" from the turn of the millennium can be encouraging and helpful, but its "spirit" must be always again translated into a new situation.

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