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Round table 1: Basic ideas and "modus operandi" behind the EU
modernisation agenda and the Bologna Process

Introduction

**The ideas and initiatives
that led to the Bologna Declaration,
and what it does not contain**

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Preliminary remarks

The Bologna Declaration initiated a dynamic process of change for the systems of higher education. No political debate about HE takes place without it. This applies not only to the member countries of the EAHE, but also to countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Bologna Process is in operation, albeit differently, in the countries of the EAHE. The conference of ministers in Budapest and Vienna in 2010 and its political repercussions have made public strong criticism of the political programme of the Bologna Declaration and its implementation. This criticism, which is often polemical, holds the Bologna Declaration responsible for all the weaknesses of HE. The Bologna Process is allegedly destroying the university in that it removes its strengths, or its alleged strengths. Above all, wherever Humboldt's concept of the university is still proclaimed complaints are voiced about the economization of the university and the replacement of "education" ("Bildung") by "training" ("Ausbildung"). In the younger HE institutions, in the non-university sector this is far less the case than in the traditional universities. The debate is not always rational, which is astonishing, as the issue is institutions of the greatest rationality.

It is advisable to take a close look at what the political programme and the plan of action of the Bologna Declaration actually says and what it does not say. Naturally, one must also analyse the weaknesses of the declaration. It is important to distinguish between the weaknesses of the declaration and the mistakes made in implementing it.

On setting about doing this I openly admit that there is a danger of partiality, as I played a role in the development of the Bologna Declaration. However I endeavour to remain factual and to judge objectively. I request that you devote my argument the appropriate critical attention.

1. The Sorbonne Declaration

As is known Bologna Declaration is a further development of the Sorbonne Declaration.

1.1. The political programme

The Sorbonne Declaration takes up two pages in the 150 page volume of the documents produced for the celebration of the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne University in May 1998. It was signed by the ministers responsible for universities in the governments of France, Germany, Italy and the UK.

The title of the Sorbonne Declaration is: *“Joint declaration. Harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system”*. It states that the European process has made great progress. But it adds that it should not be forgotten that Europe is not to be understood only in terms of economics but also as a Europe of knowledge. It is regretted that, unlike what used to be the case, students cannot profit from studying outside their own country. Due to the changes in the world of work and in education but also on account of the process of life-long learning there exists an obligation towards students and society as a whole to create *“a higher education system in which they are given the best opportunities to seek and find their own area of excellence”*. A system which creates an *“open European area for higher learning”* where mobility and cooperation are strengthened, while taking in account all the differences. The international recognition and the attractive potential of the European systems are related to their *“readability”*. Consequently: *“A system, in which two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, should be recognized for international comparison and equivalence, seems to emerge.”* The importance of credits, for example the ECTS is emphasised. *“... students should be able to enter the academic world at any time in their professional life and from diverse backgrounds.”* It is stated that the international recognition of the degree of the first cycle as an *“appropriate level of qualification”* is necessary for the success of the undertaking. In the graduate cycle there should be shorter master’s degree studies and longer

doctorate studies. In both of these studies research and independent working should be given the appropriate importance. In both cycles students should be encouraged to spend at least one semester abroad. Teachers and researchers ought to work in other countries as well as their own. The growing support for the mobility of students and academic teachers provided by the EU should be utilised.

The text of the Sorbonne Declaration emphasises agreement between many countries, in and outside Europe, between rectors, university presidents and academics. The constructive effect of the Lisbon Convention and of the directives of the EU with regard to mutual recognition of academic degrees for professional purposes is emphasized. The governments have significant roles to play in improving recognition of academic degrees. The minister signatories augment the programme of improving recognition and making mobility possible by creating “*employability*”.

At the end of the declaration the four ministers appeal to the other member states of the Union and to other European countries to integrate the goals of the declaration and, at all European universities, “*to consolidate Europe’s standing through continuously improved and updated education for its citizens.*”

1.2. The story

A political manifesto of this kind was “in the air” (Pavel Zgaga). There were white papers, expert reports and government documents that contained individual elements of the renewal of the HE systems. Examples include the “Dearing Report” in UK 1997 and the “Attali-Report” in France in 1998. In Germany and France in particular it became clear that the universities there were lagging behind the USA and Australia in terms of attractiveness for students from outside Europe.

The Lisbon Convention was passed in 1997. It regulates the recognition of institutions and the academic degrees of individual persons. The Lisbon Convention is binding on the contract parties. It covers a far larger sphere of

influence than the member states of the EU. The weakness of the convention is, however, that it is hardly possible to make valid comparisons of qualifications in terms of content at a reasonable expense, and therefore the convention is limited to formal qualifications. The European mobility programmes had grown increasingly successful. There was also a hope that an international reform initiative could become a motor for approaches to national reforms.

The publication of the Sorbonne Declaration was not preceded by consultations with other countries and European organizations, nor with the European Commission. A number of high-ranking representatives of these potential dialogue partners were present at the Sorbonne event. The declaration was presented and was elucidated and commented upon by several participants.

To enable the process to continue the Italian minister issued invitations to a follow-up conference in Bologna in 1999. There was no further plan or programme of action.

1.3. Criticism of the Sorbonne Declaration

The declaration quickly attracted widespread attention. Criticism was generally directed at the way the declaration had been arrived at and at its contents.

Representatives of the small EU states found it difficult to accept that the ministers of the four large countries had organised the matter among themselves. Those responsible in the EU Commission felt that they had been taken by surprise. There were also doubts whether the preparation of the follow-up conference in Italy could guarantee decisive further developments.

It was the term “harmonisation” that provoked the greatest outrage. Harmonisation was seen by critics as imposing adaptation of important elements of HE, and as a threat to national independence in educational policy. It was of little avail to point out to the critics that the term harmonisation occurs only in the title of the declaration and once in the text.

In terms of content criticism was also voiced about the vagueness of the statements. The vagueness that did indeed exist was the source of a variety of interpretations. Certain durations for the individual cycles were read into the “2-cycle-architecture” of studies suggested in the declaration.

The lack of a binding, stated definition of the legal nature was a source of annoyance, above all to lawyers. The non-binding nature of a political manifesto without a concrete plan of action made the declaration appear worthless.

For many academics there seemed to be a threat of state intervention in the autonomous area.

What were the actual facts? The “European area of higher education” was not completely new. One of the goals of the SOCRATES-Programme had been “*an open area for co-operation in education*”. Naturally, such an “*open area for co-operation*” seemed less demanding in terms of abandoning national characteristics than the proposal contained in the Sorbonne Declaration. It could not be ignored that the declaration was well suited to the Maastricht Treaty. Although EU instruments were built into the declaration, the EU is not expressly mentioned.

Guy Haug, who at the suggestion of the “Bologna Declaration” working group (see Chapter 2.1) was commissioned to develop the “Project Report. Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education”, clarified what is in the Sorbonne Declaration and what not. He emphasized the concern behind the initiative that led to the declaration about the competitiveness of European students, teachers and researchers. In the declaration, he said, the issue is not so much academic degrees and their recognition but qualifications and the formation of a European and international employment market.

The extremely contentious term “harmonisation”: Guy Haug points out that it is used only in connection with the structural characteristics, namely the

“architecture” of the HE system and the *“overall framework of degrees and cycles”*. There is no reference to contents and indeed, he says, this was not even aimed at. Guy Haug uses statements at the Sorbonne celebration to interpret the Sorbonne Declaration and comes to the conclusion that the Sorbonne Declaration is not a completed initiative which could only be successful if supported by more than states than the four signatory countries. The declaration, he says, is a plea *“... for Europe to take up its full role in the world markets of knowledge and education”*.

I believe that perhaps the Sorbonne Declaration also documents a way of proceeding that was too rapid and therefore inadequate, where it was hoped to manage without detailed consultation and with broad participation.

But as a programmatic paper it represented an overdue impetus for accelerated development in the right direction. The dynamics it introduced into the political developments and the changes to HE institutions could not be known at the time, but they could be intimated and desired.

2. From Paris to Bologna: the Bologna Declaration

2.1. The Austrian Initiative

The Austrian EU presidency began shortly after the signing of the Sorbonne Declaration. This offered an opportunity (but not an obligation) to become active. Anger about the joint action taken by the four big states was soon forgotten. Decisive here was the recognition of an opportunity to correct the few weak points of the Sorbonne Declaration and, by means of broadly based cooperation, to work out a version that would be acceptable to HE institutions and to those in positions of political responsibility in as many countries as possible.

In response to the proposal of the Austrian Minister responsible for HE and research (Caspar Einem) a working group was set up by the directors general for HE and the chairpersons of the rectors' conferences of the EU member states.

This group appointed the Austrian director general as its chairperson and, at the end of the Austrian EU presidency, elected him permanent chairperson.

The following were invited to collaborate: representatives of the troika ministries, the ministries of the Sorbonne signatory countries, the Confederation of European Union Rector's Conferences, the Association of European Universities (CRE) and the European Commission, representatives of the Italian rector's conference and of the University of Bologna.

The following tasks were assigned to the working group or were determined by the group itself:

- to function as a steering group for the project "Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education" (authors: Guy Haug, Jette Kirstein)
- together with the Italian representatives, the preparation of a draft of proposal for a declaration that would be signed in Bologna and the preparatory work for the signing

The UK Secretary of State responsible for universities (Baroness Blackstone) facilitated the start by declaring at the EU ministers' conference in Austria in 1998 that: "*harmonisation does not mean harmonisation*".

2.2. The new ideas

The Sorbonne follow-up working group developed the following definitions and improvements for the Bologna Declaration, and its implementation:

- the principles of the Sorbonne Declaration are retained
- the character of the political manifesto is preserved and augmented by a plan of action
- the declaration refers to the "Magna Charta Universitatum", Bologna 1988,
- "harmonisation" is replaced by "voluntary convergence"; this applies to the ministries and the HE institutions
- the declaration applies to the entire area of HE education and not just to the universities
- validity is made possible outside the EU for all European countries

- there is to be no fixed central steering but rather rotating steering
- monitoring is intended to produce pressure to take action
- a period for setting up the EAHE is defined (by 2010)

The working group has held meetings in Brussels, Helsinki, Lisbon, Rome and Vienna. Guy Haug was commissioned to write the first draft of the declaration. The draft finally adopted by the working group was sent by the Italian organisers to the invited ministers for their response.

2.3. The political manifesto and the programme of action

The signing by 29 ministers or their representatives took place on June 19, 1999 on the second day of the Bologna conference after the end of the academic day.

- o The Bologna Declaration is not a treaty according to international law but a political manifesto with which the ministers announce the intention to change the structures of the HE system in their respective countries voluntarily and in a convergent way. The Bologna reform is not imposed on the countries. Nevertheless it is clear that the individual governments and HE institutions note a pressure to make changes which they can only avoid by rejecting the main principles of the changes that were recognized as appropriate for all.
- o The issue is joint answers by the European countries to problems that are recognized by and apply to all of them, despite their individual differences. The aim is not to standardize the individual HE systems. Much of their diversity should be preserved. The autonomy of HE institutions should not be tampered with but, on the contrary, should be strengthened.
- o This declaration aims for global competitiveness of the individual HE systems and therefore of Europe as a whole.

- The declaration is not only a political manifesto it also contains the self-commitment to carry out a programme of action. The goal is the creation of the EAHE by 2010 through
 - “*common framework of readable and comparable degrees*”
 - “*undergraduate and postgraduate levels*”
 - undergraduate studies that are no shorter than 3 years
 - undergraduate studies that are “*relevant to the labour market*”
 - ECTS compatible credit systems
 - credit systems that record “*lifelong activities*”
 - a quality assurance system that employs comparable methods
 - the removal of barriers to mobility for students, teachers, researchers and administrators

- The HE institutions are the protagonists of changes. They should
 - determine the profiles of their curricula for bachelor studies and master studies. The bachelor studies should be suited to the requirements of people who are working. The master studies should meet the needs of mobile students.
 - exploit their worldwide networks for curriculum development, also joint curricula.
 - ensure that each HE institution, individually and also organized in associations, develops further the processes introduced by the Bologna Declaration.

2.4. Actual and alleged weaknesses

The Bologna Declaration is not a contract under international law. It does not have any legal effect. Through the aspect of voluntary commitment it exerts a real effect on changes in the individual national systems. The social pressure to take action will be maintained or indeed even strengthened through a follow-up in the form of stock-taking. There are no threats of sanctions. The necessary impetus is provided by the wish to be successful in projects jointly regarded as important and

the wish to be involved on the part of each national policy and the individual HE institutions and supra-national organizations.

It is doubtful whether any contract could have a greater effect in a shorter time. Even supposing that such a contract could be made in the first place, which is far from certain, it would definitely demand far more time.

The ministers signed the declaration, i.e. the political manifesto, with the commitment to taking action. A signature of this kind has no advance democratic support, apart from the procedure for the appointment of the minister to his or her office. But implementation in the individual states demands democratically regulated procedures, that is to say legislation. What is also politically necessary is the work of convincing people, above all those from academia; with the management of the HE institutions this is not so necessary.

The lack of an opt-out regulation was criticised, above all by the lawyers. An answer to this criticism is that opting out of a political manifesto could of course be declared politically. However there are no indications of such a move.

One of the starting points of the declaration, namely the lack of competitiveness among HE institutions is constantly contested by student organisations and parts of academia. What is important, they say, is increasing state funding. More money is required to increase the degree of mobility. Two real weaknesses become apparent in this context. First of all the absence in the declaration of statements about financing, secondly the belief that realities can be changed easily by changing regulations, which is particularly widespread in ministries, seems to be a misconception. The time needed to change cultures has probably been underestimated. It is easier to change structures than cultures. The problem of the way the declaration is perceived by the members of academia, more than a few of whom are unwilling to change, was not paid any attention in the declaration. This, however, appears particularly important, as the HE institutions themselves are expected to bring about the necessary changes. The approach of “retaining what is supposedly well-proven” needs to be overcome.

The declaration does not demand from governments or oblige ministers to remove social and economic hurdles. The Bologna Declaration has not, at least expressly, described students as clearly and frequently as the goal of the measures as is the case in the Sorbonne Declaration.

The declaration's concentration on the competitiveness of the European university systems leads many critics to equate this with economic competition and to fear an "economization" of the HE institutions. Many do not like competition at all. One cannot see here a flaw in the declaration.

Without doubt many of the formulations are vague, which is interpreted by the critics as weaknesses. The opposite is the case. The political declaration must allow room for the desired variety of implementations. And a number of things do not succeed in reality as aimed for by the programme. This is normal, so long as the goals are not betrayed (Pavel Zgaga).

One shortcoming of the declaration is certainly the fact the research in HE institutions is not mentioned at all. The Bologna follow-up soon made up for this failure by dealing with PhD studies.

3. What is not contained in the Bologna Declaration

The Bologna Declaration is cited as the immediate cause or catalyst of undesirable developments in HE systems. Occasionally the "Declaration's" regulations are made into new EU regulations which are in any case to be rejected. There are also indignant assessments of the declaration as being a naïve and unsuitable imitation of the USA. Critics, who ought to know the declaration better, talk about matters that do not form part of the declaration in the first place, or effects that, although perhaps not intended, emerge as consequences of the declaration. Both these phenomena are used as arguments against the Bologna reform and are employed to preserve systems that have, allegedly, proved their worth.

3.1. Architecture of the studies

- bachelor studies: part of the old diploma (degree) studies as an intermediate conclusion of studies
- bachelor studies: as much special knowledge as possible, as many examinations as possible that test knowledge.
- bachelor studies: cost more than the old diploma studies
- bachelor studies: qualify graduates for very specific professions
- bachelor studies: freely chosen subjects are to be restricted
- bachelor studies: serve instruction more than learning
- master studies: 90 % of those who take a bachelor degree complete a master's immediately after graduating.

3.2. Curricula

- “education” is replaced by “training” for very specific professions
- “training”, unlike “education”, is not based on independence and does not aim for independence
- “standard is what is offered at my institute.”

3.3. Bureaucracy

- The traditional bureaucracy is replaced by a new one or is enlarged. Perhaps here one can recognise a flight from accepting responsibility for decisions. In place of many legal regulations that had to be obeyed or which had to be circumvented by rules, benchmarks emerge that leave little or hardly any room for decisions, which in turn establishes security.
- a multitude of new forms
- many new committees
- many new obligations to make reports to new agencies etc.
- everything has to be measured, many new statisti

3.4. Role of ministries

From the HE institutions one hears the opinion, voiced by those who wish to preserve what has supposedly proven its worth, that the whole business is a government initiative and should be rejected for the sake of the autonomy of their organisation. From the state side there is also the cynical view that, on account of the new autonomy which makes the HE institutions the true protagonists of the development, the ministries cannot do anything more just watch and wait until autonomy is exposed as a misguided development. A new role as partner of the HE institutions and advocate of HE and research is not being developed as urgently as is necessary.

In conclusion: the recognisable dominant developments offer reason for optimism: what is needed is fantasy, patience and impatience at the same time – but for the right things – and cooperation, both national and international.

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