

International Forum on Higher Education Reform: Foresight 2020
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Statement from Dr. Dominic Orr on 27th September¹

The use of monitoring systems to tell us where we are in the fulfilment of the Bologna objectives has been an element of the Bologna Process from the very beginning. Until now – or at least 2009 – the focus has been on implementing the architecture of Bologna. However, the various Communiqués have always contained many more objectives. I would like to talk about the objective called the “social dimension” and connect this to an objective of the EU modernisation agenda, making higher education more effective.

As many of you know, I am the international project leader of EUROSTUDENT. This is a study, which looks into what is now called the “social dimension” of higher education. We are, therefore, concerned with the question of how higher education can be opened up for talented individuals no matter what their social background or personal circumstances. This is one of the key goals of the Bologna Process. At the same time, I would argue that providing higher education in such a way that all people can really benefit from it, is a way of ensuring the effectiveness and relevance of higher education. These are main goals for the EU modernisation agenda.

So how might this be done? I will not present data from my project here, but you can be sure that what I will show is influenced by the data. I will instead show you a simple scheme which tries to link both students' personal circumstances with effective higher education provision. I propose to you that students dedicate more or less efforts to their studies – and that this is related to their personal circumstances. Further, I propose that study programmes may be organised in such a way as to be more or less flexible. One thing we have learnt from EUROSTUDENT is that this is more than just the “administrative status” of students. For instance, in Germany and a number of other countries, students had very flexible study programmes even without official part-time programmes. And in other countries, students on official part-time programmes have the same study intensity and lack of flexibility as their counterparts on full-time programmes. What I am talking about, therefore, is de facto flexibility.

The chart (shown below) creates a matrix on the basis of these two axes.

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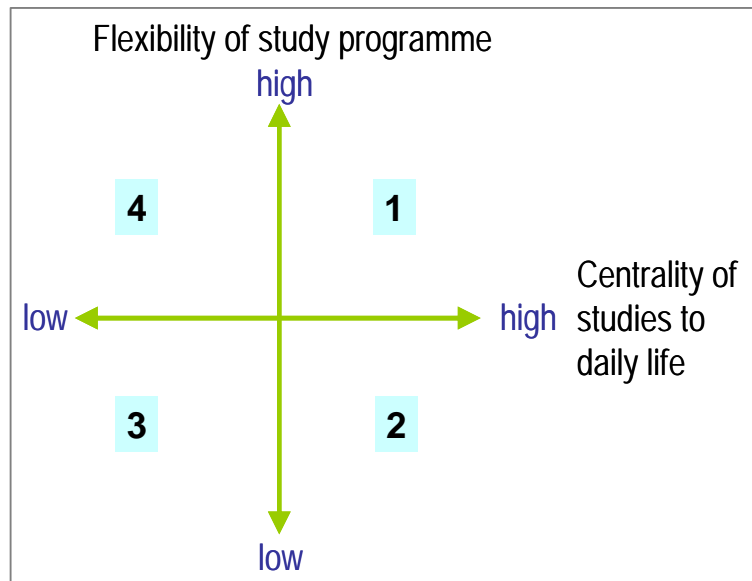
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So, let us now briefly go through the various constellations:

1. High centrality of studies, high flexibility of study programme

Students, who focus for a period of time almost exclusively on studying are at the core of most concepts of higher education. In particular, in the Humboldtian tradition there is the concept of a student as a young scientist, who should be given space and freedom to experiment and find his or her own way intellectually. This is what is meant in this tradition by higher learning or indeed by “Bildung”. However, this concept presumes a high level of commitment, in terms of both energy and time, to studies and a high, mature level of intellectual ability in order to benefit from this constellation.



2. High centrality of studies, low flexibility of study programme

The difference to the first constellation is that the student’s study programme is not flexible, but is tightly structured. This has to do both with the concept of student learning and the subject being studied. In the first instance, the idea may be that students need more support in their learning (more *pedagogy*). This is why it is often characterised as school-like. In certain subject areas, the curriculum tends to be more strictly structured than others, as it is believed that there is a definitive curriculum, which must be worked through in the course of studies (e.g. engineering, medicine and law). However, in some systems all courses are offered in this way. The advantage of this strict organisation is that it is easier to follow for students and requires less developed learning skills at the outset (it is also easier for organisations to plan efficiently). At the same time, it affords students less opportunities for experimentation. In many countries, a strict implementation of the Bologna structures is being criticised for this effect.

3. Low centrality of studies, low flexibility of study programme

A low flexibility of a study programme in combination with a low centrality of studies in comparison to individual students’ other activities will make it hard for students to find an adequate balance between studies and these other activities. As mentioned above, there are students who either by choice or by personal circumstance have other activities such as working or childcare, which prevent them from dedicating the expected time and energy to their studies in a normal study programme. Under this constellation, they are likely to be at risk of dropping out of their studies. Again, this situation is seen currently as particularly problematic in Germany, where the Bologna reforms enforce a tighter curriculum than was previously the case and, therefore, risk ostracising non-traditional student groups, whose participation was already low in German higher education.

4. Low centrality of studies, high flexibility of study programme

The solution to offering non-traditional students a higher education programme may be seen in the constellation of a highly flexible study programme. Often this means going further than simply

offering part-time courses, whereby the study intensity expected of students is reduced by half. Moreover, flexibility might be achieved by a flexible modular structure of studying as often found in Scandinavian higher education. This constellation is particularly good for lifelong learning and for late entrants into higher education. As with the other form of flexible learning (box 1), this constellation comes with a risk of lack of orientation for the learner and less integration into the university experience. Amongst other things, it therefore necessitates particular support at the start of the study programme.

I think that if we are to take the goals expressed by the Bologna and the Modernisation agendas seriously, we have to think more carefully about these constellations and their consequences. Indeed, I think that students have argued this in their protests and that the ministers have agreed this in their Budapest/Vienna Declaration from March this year.

So what of the future of higher education in view of these four constellations? It would seem that two contrasting constellations of high centrality and low flexibility (box 2) and low centrality of studies and high flexibility of study programme (box 4) will be the most important for securing the sustainability of higher education in the future. This is because they cater for the two main client groups in higher education within the context of *further quantitative expansion* of higher education provision and *widening participation* beyond the young, single (“normal”) student.

In the first instance of quantitative expansion, many more young people must be recruited into higher education in order to secure talent for society and the labour market in the context of the knowledge society. However, it can no longer be presumed that all students have the intellectual maturity to cope with a self-directed curriculum without support at university level.

In the second instance of widening participation, additional sections of society must be recruited into higher education to up-skill, to further their education in a system without educational dead-ends. The main problem for these students, who are likely to be older than the “normal” student, will be organising their weekly time budget in accordance with both studies and other obligations. That is why they will require a flexible study programme.

Whilst taking account of these pragmatic conditions, it should not be forgotten that higher education has the task of providing opportunities for higher learning. The division of higher education courses into three cycles according to the Bologna reform may provide some solution to this issue, by giving students increasingly greater opportunities for self-directed learning and intellectual self-discovery as they progress from Bachelor to Master to doctoral programmes. However, the concept of a student as an inquisitive learner (and indeed an independent scientist) should not be lost to Bachelor courses, whilst, at the same time, the real situation of individual students (not the normal or average student) should be considered. As a German university president recently argued, that is the real challenge for the Bologna leading up to 2020.