

Higher Education in Europe 2009: Development in the Bologna Process

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The title of this article replicates the title of a report published by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), which reports on the progress and benefits of the Bologna Process (see EACEA 2009). The report claims the central objective of creating a European Higher Education Area by 2010 will be met by the end of this year. There are now 46 signatory countries to the Bologna Process, and although each country has faced different challenges, all are negatively affected by the current financial crisis. The data of the report is based on gathering information through the Eurydice National units for thirty-one countries along with the information collected through the fifteen national representatives in the Bologna Follow-Up Group. The report asserts that cooperation at the European level continues to be vital along with finding better ways to monitor and assess the reform. Investment in European higher education, along with all levels of education, is viewed as an important part of ensuring sustainable economic and social development. This brief article will summarize the report's findings.

Bachelor-Master Structure

There are three sequential levels identified by the Bologna Process, first cycle, second cycle, and third cycle that include the bachelor, master's, and doctorate degrees, respectively.

For the first cycle bachelor programs, the 180 ETCS credit 3-year model is used in 19 countries, while 11 countries have opted for the 240 ETCS credit 4-year model.

In the second cycle master's programs, the 120 ETCS 2-year model has found favor in 29 countries, having gained far more ground than other approaches.

For the combined first and second cycle (bachelor and master's) programs, the 180 + 120 ETCS credit configuration is the most typical arrangement. In 17 countries it is the most prominent model and is also found in 22 additional countries where there is not an established, single model.

The new three-cycle structure has been initiated in all countries in most institutions and programs, although medicine, architecture and engineering remain outside the new structures in some countries.

There are considerable differences across the European region regarding the articulation between vocational education at the ISCED 5B level and the first cycle of higher education. Countries that organize vocational education as a separate system seem inclined to ignore the Bologna approach. Only 10 countries have included Bologna structures, chiefly the bachelor concept, to include the ISCED 5B vocational level. Other countries have been satisfied with connections between the Bologna first cycle bachelor programs and the ISCED 5B level. Still other countries have developed higher and vocational educations along separate but analogous lines.

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a student workload required to achieve certain outcomes. It was developed in the 1980s, and was established to facilitate recognition and transfer of credits earned during study abroad. It has been devel-

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oped into an accumulation system to be implemented in all programs at institutional, regional, national and European levels. Most countries would have ECTS embedded in legislation, but some countries do not have regulations. There are significant variations in how the ECTS system is implemented and applied to many programs. In 27 countries, more than 75 percent of institutions and programs are using ECTS for both transfer and accumulation purposes, and can be divided into three groups:

In 13 countries (Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Macedonia, Georgia, Iceland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Moldova, The Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and Serbia), learning outcomes and student workload have jointly replaced other methods.

In seven of the countries (Austria, Finland, France, Hungary, Malta, Portugal and Ukraine), student workload has replaced contact hours to define credits.

In another seven countries (Azerbaijan, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Ireland, Montenegro and Poland), contact hours or a combination of contact hours and student workload are still used to define credits.

Eighteen countries in two groups have not yet fully implemented the ECTS concept.

In 11 countries (Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain), fewer than 75 percent of institutions and/or programs have implemented ECTS and use various methods to define credits.

In six countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom), a national credit system runs parallel with ECTS. There is a trend towards full ECTS implementation in the three Baltic countries.

Although 37 countries have guidance and information mechanisms of implementing ECTS, only nine actually plan funds for these activities (p. 30).

Diploma Supplement

The Diploma Supplement (DS) is a document available free of charge in widely spoken European languages that is attached to a higher education diploma and provides detailed information about the nature, level, context, content and status of studies successfully completed. The scope of the DS is to improve international transparency and facilitate academic and professional recognition of qualifications. The report says “all graduating students should receive this document automatically, free of charge and in a widely used European language” (p. 31). In reality this is not happening, and the report states that some countries issue the diploma supplement only on request. Also, countries are grouped to show the variations of implementation of the diploma supplement based on the language of issuance.

National Qualifications Framework

The National Qualifications Framework is an *overarching* framework for the entire European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that clarifies and explains the relationship between the national higher education frameworks of qualifications that are now being developed in the Bologna Process, and the qualifications that they cover. The FQ-EHEA has descriptors for each of the three cycles of qualifications, and includes ECTS credit ranges for the first two cycles (p. 41).

Fifteen Bologna signatory countries have officially adopted a national qualifications framework.

Belgium-Flemish Community, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom—which has two national qualifications frameworks (one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and another framework for Scotland)—have fully completed the process, including the self-certification of its compatibility with the European framework.

Belgium-French Community, Denmark, Estonia, France, Iceland, Malta, and Sweden are using national qualifications frameworks in re-designing study programs.

Recently, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia have officially adopted and started to implement national qualifications frameworks.

Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Portugal, Slovenia, and Ukraine are at a very early stage of working with national qualifications frameworks that are not yet adopted into legislation. Completion of the process is expected before 2011-2012.

Mobility and Portability of Student Support

Student mobility data of the European Higher Education Area (p. 43) is incomplete. It is difficult to identify the real factors that affect mobility. Erasmus Mundus programs are one of the biggest sources of providing student mobility. An east-west divide between countries which do and do not provide financial support is illustrated (p. 51). The map breaks down the specific support to mobility. Worth remembering is the following statement: "The policy challenge is to balance the need for accountability and good use of public money with the need to ensure that additional restrictions on funds

are not so off-putting to students who would be interested in benefitting from the experience of higher education in another country that they are dissuaded from applying" (p. 52).

This section continues with a graph showing the conditions that govern the portability of financial support for full-time students in the academic year 2008-2009. Another graph shows conditions governing mobility for specific host countries for the same academic period. It appears that the type of program with its restrictions and conditions makes a difference. Another graph shows the conditions governing portability related to the type of program or academic performance for the academic year 2008-2009. The report concludes with the following question: "How open and inclusive can the European Higher Education Area be if the myriad national restrictions currently in place continue beyond 2010" (p. 56)?

Reference

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