

## The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process is a European process of reform aims to create a common Higher Education Space by 2010. At present, 45 countries participate in it, with the support of several international organisations. It represents a great effort towards convergence of the higher education systems of the participating countries, and it involves directly all European higher education institutions and their components. The objective is that by 2010 the higher education systems of the signatory countries should be organised in such a way as to guarantee:

- transparency and readability of educational programmes and qualifications
- the concrete possibility for students and graduates easily to continue their studies or to find employment in another European country
- a greater attractiveness of European Higher Education for citizens of other countries
- the offer of a broad and high quality knowledge base to ensure economic and social development of the partner countries.

The objective is very ambitious and success will involve other elements besides the Bologna Process. Nonetheless, the Process is intended to prepare and make operative the tools necessary to reach the goals.

It is necessary to clarify at the outset two aspects of the Process.

In the first place, it is not based on an international treaty which is binding for the governments of the various countries: even though the responsible Ministers have signed documents of various types, each country -- and its academic community -- adheres freely and voluntarily to the agreed principles, motivated only by the desire to reach a common goal.

In the second place, the Process does not aim at the 'harmonisation' of the European systems of Higher Education, but encourages the preservation of their diversity, albeit within a common framework; and it builds bridges between different countries and educational systems, preserving at the same time their specific characteristics.

The process is carried out at various levels: international, national and institutional.

At the international level there are various methods of collaboration and various structures which contribute to advancing the process.

First of all, the Ministers of Education of the signatory countries meet every two years to evaluate the results obtained, formulate further indications and establish priorities for the following two years. After the first meeting in Bologna in 1999, the Ministers met in Prague in 2001, a Berlin in 2003 and in Bergen in 2005. The next meeting will be held in London in 2007. In the lapse of time between the ministerial conferences, the "Bologna Follow-Up Group", which meets twice a year, has a fundamental role. It is composed of representatives of all the signatory countries and of the European Commission. The Council of Europe, the EI (Education International Pan-European Structure), the ENQA (the association of the European Quality Assurance Agencies), the ESIB (the Association of the European Student unions), the EUA (the European University Association), the EURASHE (the association of the non-University Higher Education Sector), the UNESCO-CEPES and the UNICE (the confederation of European industrialists) meetings have the role of consultative members. Lastly, numerous seminars, called "Bologna seminars" are organised each year in various venues in order to discuss the themes connected to the Process, and to examine the obstacles which still subsist and to propose new forms of collaboration.

The national level sees in each country the involvement of the government, and in particular, the Minister responsible for higher education, the Rectors' conference or other Associations of institutions of higher education, of student organisations, and in some cases, of Quality assurance agencies, employers' associations or other relevant associations. Many European countries have already carried out the structural reforms of their higher education systems in order to comply with the Bologna objectives, whereas others are preparing to do so: in some cases this means modifying

the structure of the qualifications and the organisation of curricula, in others the introduction of ECTS or facilitating student mobility.

At Institutional level Faculties, Departments, Programme Boards and many other components of the academic world have been involved in the reform process. The fundamental role of the institutions in the Bologna Process must be underlined. It is very clear that without the direct involvement and the convinced participation of academics, who are responsible for the correct application of the European principles at institutional level, it will be very difficult to reach some of the objectives indicated by the Ministers ever since the beginning of the Process.

The Declaration originally signed in Bologna (1999) had six specific objectives:

- Adoption of a system of degrees easily understandable and comparable, also through the use of the Diploma Supplement
- Adoption of a system essentially founded on two principal cycles, respectively of first and second level
- Adoption of a system of didactic credits such as ECTS
- Promotion of mobility through the removal of obstacles to the full development of the circulation of students, researchers and administrative staff
- Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance
- Promotion of the necessary European dimension of higher education

On these principles in the Salamanca message the European higher education institutions, represented by the EUA, expressed their opinion, reaffirming their autonomy, and declaring their complete willingness to follow them. In their turn the students of the ESIB presented the Declaration of Goteborg as their contribution to the next meeting of the Ministers.

Because of the dynamic character of the Process, the Ministerial Conference of Prague (2001) enriched it with new objectives. In particular

- The institutions and the students are recognised as full partners in trying to achieve the common objectives;
- The social dimension of the Bologna process is reaffirmed
- The principle that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility is reaffirmed.

The meeting of 40 Ministers in Berlin added another important objective to the Bologna Process: Research has a fundamental role in higher institutions in Europe: the European Higher Education Space and the European Research Area constitute the two pilasters of knowledge based society. It is necessary to go beyond the two cycles and include the third cycle, the doctorate, in the process of European convergence.

Furthermore, in Berlin, the Ministers decided to evaluate on the subsequent Bergen meeting (2005) the progress made on the three objectives of the Bologna Process identified as priorities:

- The two cycle system
- Quality assurance
- Recognition of degrees and periods of study

To that end they asked the Bologna Follow-up Group to carry out a comparative analysis of the results obtained in the three sectors by each of the signatory countries and to have carried out a detailed study of two particular themes:

- Common criteria and guidelines for quality assurance, with a mandate to the ENQA (European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies)
- A European Qualifications Framework - based on work-load, level, learning outcomes, competences and professional profile – with mandate to the special work group

In the recent Bergen meeting (19-20 May 2005) the Ministers received the report of the Follow-up Group on the progress of the national reform processes in the three areas identified as priorities, taking note of the progress made and the problems still to be solved. They also received the document of the work group on the Overarching European Qualifications Framework, which includes, among other elements, the “Dublin Descriptors”, promising to elaborate within 2010 of the national frameworks compatible with the common framework. They adopted the criteria and guidelines proposed by ENQA for the quality assurance and accepted the principle of a European Register of Evaluation Agencies subject to annual checks.

The new priorities outlined by the Ministers for 2005-7 regard:

- Synergy between education and research and the organisation of doctoral studies
- The social dimension of the Bologna Process
- Mobility of students and staff in the area of the participating countries
- Relations between the European Higher Education Space and the rest of the world.

For the London meeting in 2007 mandate will be given to the EUA to prepare a report on the fundamental principals relative to doctoral studies, while the Follow-up Group will present data on mobility and on the social dimension of studies in the participating countries.

The Follow-up Group, furthermore, will be asked to continue its analysis of progress made in the various countries with respect to the cycles of studies, quality and recognition, with particular attention to:

- implementation of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance as proposed in the ENQA report;
- implementation of the national frameworks for qualifications;
- the awarding and recognition of joint degrees, including at the doctorate level;
- creating opportunities for flexible learning paths in higher education, including procedures for the recognition of prior learning.

At present, the 45 signatory countries of the Bologna Process are: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldavia, Norway, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Ex-Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Slovakia, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine.