

The Bologna Process and the EU: neither within nor without¹

Cornelia Racké, Universiteit Maastricht
c.racke@politics.unimaas.nl

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Abstract

The Bologna Process, the process of creating the European Higher Education Area, is often perceived and also portrayed as an EU process, which it certainly is not. The interesting thing about the Bologna Process is that it was initiated by EU countries but outside the EU framework; it still takes place outside the EU framework, but at the same time is closely linked to this framework in many ways. The purpose of this paper is to remove some of the existing confusion on the nature of the Bologna Process and its relation to EU cooperation. I will start by looking at how the Bologna Process came about and why it was initiated outside the EU. In a second step I will then show how and why the Bologna Process and the EU framework still became interlinked. In a third and final step, I will discuss potential implications for both the Bologna Process and EU cooperation.

I will argue that the main motivation to initiate the Bologna Process was to facilitate domestic reforms, which was reinforced by international competition and the perceived need to increase attractiveness. The Bologna Process was initiated outside the EU as ministers wished to maintain full control over the process and sought to avoid a transfer of competences or even a standardisation of European higher education systems. At the same time the Bologna Process built upon EU cooperation in several ways. Many issues dealt with by the Bologna Process had already been raised within the EU, most notably the questions related to mobility. Moreover, EU member states used their positive and negative experiences with EU cooperation to develop similar or better rules and procedures for the Bologna Process. As a result, the EU Presidency is in charge of managing the process and the European Commission has been accepted as a member and an important grant giving body.

Still, it would not be fair to say that the Bologna Process is just another form of EU governance. Although building on the EU framework, the Bologna Process is based on non-binding intergovernmental cooperation outside the EU. 20 of the 45 participating countries are not members of the EU (one of them being Russia) and governmental and nongovernmental organisations like the Council of Europe, ESIB or EUA also play an important role in steering the process. In fact, it can be argued that precisely this combination of being outside but still closely linked to the EU framework is an important reason for the huge impact the Bologna Process has all over Europe.

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Introduction

The Bologna Process, the process of creating the European Higher Education Area, is often perceived and also portrayed as a European Union (EU) process, which it certainly is not. The interesting thing about the Bologna Process is that it was initiated by EU countries but outside the EU framework; it still takes place outside the EU framework, but at the same time is closely linked to this framework in many ways. With this paper I will try to remove some of the existing confusion on the nature of the Bologna Process and its relation to EU cooperation. I will start by looking at how the Bologna Process came about and why it was initiated outside the EU. In a second step I will then show how and why the Bologna Process and the EU framework still became interlinked. In a third and final step, I will discuss potential implications for both the Bologna Process and EU cooperation.

The Sorbonne initiative

It is widely accepted that the initiative behind the Bologna Process came from the then French Education Minister Claude Allègre. In 1998 he had the idea of celebrating the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne University in Paris with a European colloquium and to use this opportunity to launch a European initiative. To this end, Allègre invited his counterparts from Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (UK) to join the celebrations in May 1998 as ‘special guests’ who would then also be awarded honorary doctorates of the Sorbonne. At this occasion, the four ministers then signed a ‘Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system’ that has since become known as the *Sorbonne Declaration*. With this declaration the four ministers committed themselves to ‘encouraging a common frame of reference, aimed at improving external recognition and facilitating student mobility as well as employability’. Furthermore, they suggested the creation of a European area of higher education ‘where national identities and common interests [could] interact and strengthen each other for the benefit of Europe, of its students, and more generally of its citizens’.

Addressing European problems

At first sight, the Sorbonne Declaration lends itself to a functional interpretation. Ministers decided to cooperate to address common European problems or problems that – due to their very nature – could not easily be solved at the national level. One such problem addressed by the Sorbonne Declaration was that of employability. The harmonisation of European higher education structures was meant to increase the employability of graduates across Europe

(interview 14 April 2005, Luxembourg). Furthermore, it was thought that a harmonisation of structures would facilitate mobility. Mobility had been the subject of cooperation at the European level for many years but substantial obstacles remained and became more and more visible the greater the demand for mobility from both students and employers (Allègre 2000: 259ff.; Hackl 2001: 16; interview 11 May 2004, Berlin). The third problem referred to by the Sorbonne Declaration was 'improving external recognition', which is to say the perceived need to improve Europe's attractiveness. With the increasing internationalisation of higher education and the emphasis on a knowledge-based economy, attracting good students from all over the world became increasingly important. At the same time, Europe was losing ground in the growing international competition for the best and brightest students (interview 14 April 2005, Luxembourg). Aware of the fact that as individual countries they would not be able to compete with their main competitor, the US, several countries therefore decided to join forces (interview 11 May 2004, Berlin).

Two-level games

A closer look though reveals that the main reasons for the Sorbonne initiative are to be found at the domestic level. While Allègre later claimed that his idea was to create a 'Europe of knowledge' (Allègre 2000: 259), his main motivation appears to have been the wish to reform the French higher education system. Employing a European approach could be understood to help overcome anticipated opposition at the national level, which is why I suggest conceptualising the Sorbonne initiative as a 'two-level game'.

Here I largely follow the line of argument presented by Moravcsik (1994). He argues that international cooperation redistributes domestic power resources in favour of national executives (heads of state or government or ministers), 'permitting them to loosen domestic constraints imposed by legislatures, interest groups, and other societal actors' (Moravcsik 1994: 1). To adopt and sustain policies, executives need sufficient support of, and are thus constrained by, domestic groups. The tighter these constraints, the less autonomy the executive has to pursue its own goals. Moravcsik (1994: 1) identifies four causal mechanisms by which international cooperation allows executives to loosen domestic constraints: 'shifting control over domestic agendas (initiative), altering decision-making procedures (institutions), magnifying informational asymmetries in their favor (information), and multiplying the potential domestic ideological justifications for policies (ideas)'.

With a number of case studies, Moravcsik (1994: 25-51) shows that the use of European politics to escape domestic constraints is not an unusual strategy but rather has accompanied

and often also driven European integration from the very beginning. Seen in this light, the Sorbonne Declaration was not a unique initiative but rather just another case of a common strategy. As one official put it, the Bologna Process is ‘a very good example...of what European processes do; they enable ministers to move where they want to move’ (interview 26 July 2005, Brussels).

So let us have a look where the French Minister wanted to move. In 1997, before initiating the Sorbonne Declaration, Allègre had commissioned a report on the French higher education system. Again, he claimed to have done so in order to answer the question ‘comment faire l’Europe des universités?’ (Allègre 2000: 260). In 1998, a commission chaired by Jacques Attali also presented a report with the title ‘Pour un modèle européen d’enseignement supérieur’ (Attali 1998), but it was essentially a report on the French higher education system and the urgent need for reform thereof. The central element of the proposed reform was the introduction of a two-cycle system with a first degree after three years of study and a second degree after five years of study (and research). A doctoral degree was to take eight years in total. The introduction of this system was meant to overcome the division in France between universities and *grandes écoles*, as both would then be able to grant the same kind of degree after five years of study. Moreover, it was meant to increase the attractiveness of the French higher education system by making it compatible with international standards (Attali 1998; Ministère de l’éducation nationale (a)). As Allègre expected strong opposition from French higher education institutions, academics and students, he thought it easier to introduce such reforms through a European rather than a domestic initiative. He therefore contacted his counterparts in Italy, Germany and the UK seeking support for his initiative to introduce a two-cycle system (interview 11 May 2004, Berlin; interview 3 June 2004, London; see also Hackl 2001: 17).

The Italian Minister, Luigi Berlinguer, had also begun a reform process and welcomed a European initiative that would help him to overcome domestic resistance. In Italy, the number of university students had risen from 268,000 in 1960 to 1,800,000 in 1995 while the higher education system had remained largely unchanged (Martinelli 1992: 359; Ministère de l’éducation nationale (b)). As a result, most students took far longer to complete their studies than intended, or they did not graduate at all (Guerzoni 1999; Luzzatto 2002). Since the late 1960s there had been several attempts to adjust the higher education system to these changing circumstances but most did not bring the expected results. When Luigi Berlinguer came into office with the new centre-left government in 1996, he was determined to lead the Italian higher education system out of this desperate situation (Ravinet 2005: 196). A new law was

passed to increase university autonomy and to increase flexibility of study programmes but the general framework established by the law needed to be further specified by ministerial decrees, which turned out to be extremely difficult. Within the higher education community many diverging opinions came to the fore, substantial changes were demanded and the general reaction was not to rush things (Luzzatto 2002). Such was the situation when Allègre's initiative to introduce a two-cycle system was made. For Berlinguer, it was the right initiative at the right time since it offered the opportunity to give a clear direction to and mobilise support for his national reforms (interview 3 June 2004, London; Luzzatto 2002).

In Germany, the introduction of the two-cycle system was only one element of a wider reform project. Already in 1996, Minister Jürgen Rüttgers had initiated a process to amend the Framework Act for Higher Education, aiming at more university autonomy on the one hand and a shorter duration of studies and higher completion rates on the other (Henkel 1997). As was to be expected, Rüttgers's reform proposals met with opposition on the part of the *Länder* governments. In the German federal system, the 16 *Länder* have the main responsibility for higher education and tend to be suspicious of any initiative from the federal government, always fearing a loss of competence. By the time the Sorbonne Declaration was being prepared, though, the main dividing line was no longer between federal level and *Länder* level but rather between parties. The Christian Democrat Rüttgers sought to have the new higher education law adopted before the general election in September 1998 but his opponents in the Social Democratic *Länder* governments were not willing to grant him this success (see Berninger 1998). Maybe Rüttgers then saw in the Sorbonne initiative a chance to mobilise broader support for his domestic reform project. In any case, it was an opportunity to present himself in a good light before the upcoming general election. Rüttgers wanted to be seen as a reformer and the celebration at the Sorbonne offered him the chance to appear as a 'European reformer' playing an important role on the international stage, who on top of that received an honorary doctorate from the Sorbonne (interview 24 November 2004, Bonn).²

So in all three cases, we can see the two-level-game logic at work. In France and Italy, the focus was on 'shifting control over domestic agendas' and especially 'multiplying the potential domestic ideological justifications for policies', to use Moravcsik's (1994: 1) terms again. While in Germany these elements may also have played a role, it appears that Rüttgers was primarily interested in enhancing his standing at the domestic level ahead of the upcoming general election (see Putnam 1988: 457).

² Determined to uphold the image of a reformer and to end his term with a success, Rüttgers eventually decided to force through the new law without the consent of the *Länder* governments (FAZ 1998).

Joining the club

In the case of the UK, though, we cannot speak of a two-level game. The UK³ already had a two-cycle system so no European initiative was required to introduce one. In 1997/98, following the Dearing Report, the UK government had introduced several other reforms that could have formed part of a European initiative but, given the widespread Euroscepticism in the UK, this might have done more harm than good and probably did not even occur to the policymakers responsible for the reforms. Similarly, the UK was neither particularly interested in promoting European mobility, nor was it very much concerned about attractiveness since its higher education system already had a very good reputation and attracted large numbers of foreign students (interview 3 June 2004, London; interview 4 June 2004, London). So why did the UK join Allègre's initiative? The main reason appears to have been that the then UK Minister for Higher Education Tessa Blackstone sought to show good will and to maintain good relations with important European partners, assuming that it would not involve any cost or commitment. First, it was a non-binding declaration. Second, in the UK, 'encouraging a common frame of reference' was interpreted as the others moving closer to the UK system – but not in a sense that it would lead to serious competition. Blackstone did not expect the initiative to have any (negative) impact on the UK higher education system and felt that it would have seemed unfriendly to reject it (interview 3 June 2004, London). Moreover, 'joining the club' would, if necessary, allow the UK to influence the direction of the endeavour (see also Ravinet 2005: 197f.).

As a result, all three ministers accepted Allègre's invitation and ultimately signed the Sorbonne Declaration, in which they also called on other European countries to join them in the objective of creating a European area of higher education. This leads us to the question: why was the initiative taken outside the EU and by the four big countries only?

Avoiding the EU framework

First of all, the initiator Claude Allègre assumed that if the 'big four' took the lead, the others would follow anyway. Moreover, he had close contacts with his colleagues in Germany and Italy (see Ravinet 2005: 189). The UK on the other hand already had the two-cycle structure the other countries sought to introduce and was successful in attracting international students. Therefore, it made sense to include the UK as well, also because they had the EU Presidency at the time. Including 15 or more countries would have made things much more complicated and would have taken much longer. Last but not least, it seems Allègre deliberately took the

³ The Scottish system is different from the one in England, Northern Ireland and Wales but it generally applies to all of them and at the European level they were all represented by one minister.

initiative outside the EU in order to avoid any transfer of competences as well as an involvement of the European Commission. This decision also suited his colleagues from Germany and the UK, although for slightly different reasons. The German Minister Rüttgers was not so much concerned about losing sovereignty. In fact, European cooperation tends to strengthen the federal level compared to the *Länder*, since the latter have the main responsibility for higher education in the German federal system. Precisely for this reason, the *Länder* strictly safeguard their competences and oppose any move that may lead to an expansion of Community competence. Taking the Sorbonne initiative within the EU would inevitably have created a conflict with the German *Länder* (interview 12 May 2004, Berlin; interview 26 July 2005, Brussels). In the UK, mistrust generated by past experiences with EU higher education cooperation was reinforced by a more general suspicion of the European Commission and its interference with national policy-making – a suspicion that was particularly pronounced in the case of Minister Blackstone. It is therefore questionable whether Blackstone would have supported the Sorbonne initiative had it been undertaken within the EU framework.

From Paris to Bologna

Using the EU framework

Still, under the Austrian Presidency in the second half of 1998 the Sorbonne initiative was taken up within the EU framework. On 23/24 October 1998, the Sorbonne Declaration was on the agenda of an informal Council meeting in Baden near Vienna. It was in fact the first opportunity for EU education ministers to discuss the Sorbonne Declaration after it had been signed in Paris in May 1998. Ministers from various countries used this opportunity to criticise the fact that the initiative had been taken by the four big countries only and stressed the need to include all EU member states. They confirmed the necessity to improve recognition and comparability of degrees to facilitate mobility but also emphasised that this should not imply harmonisation. Instead, national responsibility as well as the resulting diversity in Europe should be respected. Interestingly, the UK Minister who had signed the Sorbonne Declaration on ‘harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system’ stressed that the declaration did not imply a harmonisation of content or duration of study programmes but rather aimed at a certain convergence of higher education structures in Europe. The European Commission also offered its support for the creation of a European higher education area and called for the Sorbonne initiative to be extended to all member states. At the same time the Commission stressed that the initiative did not aim at

harmonisation; that the Community did not have any competences in the field of higher education structures and that the restructuring of the higher education systems therefore was up to the member states (internal report of the Austrian Presidency).

A few days later, the directors general for higher education and the chairmen of the rectors' conferences meeting in Vienna also discussed the Sorbonne Declaration and how to deal with it. The participants generally welcomed the initiative but also identified a number of questions that needed to be answered before implementing the initiative. As proposed by the Austrian Presidency, the meeting decided to set up a working group to prepare the next ministerial conference in Bologna. The idea for a follow-up conference had already been raised at the Sorbonne meeting, with the Italian Minister Berlinguer inviting his colleagues to come to Italy in 1999. The working party to prepare this conference was composed as follows: the troika at the time of the conference (Austria, Germany, Finland), Italy as host country, the European Commission, and one representative each from the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities (CRE) (report on the Meeting of the Directors General for Higher Education and the Chairmen of the Rectors' Conferences, Vienna, 28-29 October 1998). From the second meeting onwards, following an Italian proposal, the two other Sorbonne countries France and the UK were also represented. In total the group met four times and discussed both the programme of the conference and the wording of a new declaration to be signed by the ministers. Most of the preparatory work was, however, done by the Italian organisers who felt it was their conference and thus also their (sole) responsibility to take care of the programme and the declaration. The programme of the two-day conference consisted of two main parts: first, an academic forum with presentations and discussions from the point of view of universities organised by the University of Bologna; second, the ministerial meeting followed by a signing ceremony. While initially the conference was still referred to as a conference of EU education ministers, eventually the invitation was also extended to associated and EFTA/EEA countries (Barblan 1999; interview 13 April 2005, Luxembourg; see also minutes of the meetings of the working group).

Avoiding EU cooperation

So to some extent the Bologna conference was prepared within the EU framework and initially also referred to as a conference of EU education ministers. How come the Bologna Declaration signed at the conference then did not even mention EU cooperation and the resulting Bologna Process is now firmly placed outside the EU framework?

To be fair it has to be said that with the Sorbonne Declaration the process of creating the European higher education area had already been initiated outside of the EU framework. Although the initiative was then discussed within the EU, apparently member states never seriously considered to turn it into a proper EU initiative. There seems to have been an agreement that cooperation should be purely intergovernmental outside of or at best at the margins of the EU framework. Among the options discussed in the run-up to the Bologna conference was to continue using informal Council meetings and/or meetings of the director generals and the chairmen of the rectors' conferences for the follow-up on the Bologna Declaration. It was also suggested to take up elements of the Sorbonne initiative as part of EU cooperation where applicable (see minutes of the meetings of the working group). Accordingly, the respective paragraph of the draft declaration read as follows:

[W]e will pursue the ways of intergovernmental co-operation, together with those in the framework of the European Union (where applicable, on the basis of the subsidiarity principle and availing ourselves of the Strengthened Co-operation instrument) and of the other governmental and non governmental European organisations with competence on higher education (quoted in Zgaga 2004: 185).

During the Bologna meeting this paragraph led to serious discussion and in the end the reference to the EU and other governmental organisations was deleted – essentially because of stiff opposition from the French Minister Allègre and his UK colleague Blackstone. A related issue that was also debated at the ministerial meeting was the (continued) involvement of the European Commission. While the Italian organisers and some of the smaller countries, such as Ireland or Finland, wanted to include the European Commission as a partner, Allègre and Blackstone again vehemently opposed this move (interview 3 June 2004, London; interview 26 July 2005, Brussels; interview 9 November 2005, Dublin). Interestingly enough, the decision to exclude the Commission from the process was taken in the presence of a Commission representative. Not surprisingly, he was not pleased at all and could not understand what had happened to him. The Commission had been involved in the preparatory work of the Bologna conference, as part of which it had sponsored a study carried out by the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences on 'Trends in learning structures of higher education in EU/EEA countries', and at the conference itself it then was suddenly kicked out (interview 13 April 2005, Luxembourg; interview 14 April 2005, Luxembourg).

To better understand these developments, it is important to distinguish two things: Most if not all EU countries agreed that the process of creating the European higher education area should be based on intergovernmental cooperation and not be part of Community policy. Whether or not the process should be linked to EU cooperation and in what way was, however, a matter of debate.

Traditionally, education cooperation has been a very sensitive issue. This sensitivity is usually attributed to the importance of education for nation building, shaping national identities, promoting national language, culture and history, and for the formation of national elites. As a result, in the early days of European integration, education cooperation was not on the agenda. According to Neave (1984: 6), it even ‘remained a taboo subject within the corridors of the European Community’. Only in the 1970s was education to very slowly develop into an issue for Community cooperation. While member states were still hesitant to cooperate, fearing a loss of sovereignty, the European Court of Justice gradually expanded Community competences in the field of higher education (Hackl 2001: 10; Shaw 1999: 562f.). Supported by such rulings of the European Court of Justice, the Commission attempted to further promote cooperation among member states and higher education institutions. By the time the Maastricht Treaty was being negotiated in the early 1990s, member states had overcome some of their initial reservations but higher education cooperation remained a sensitive issue. Member states still feared a loss of sovereignty and consequently the harmonisation and transfer of competences was clearly ruled out (Field 1998: 56-63; Shaw 1999: 572-4).

Nevertheless, the European Community did have an impact on national higher education systems. Directives on mutual recognition, for instance, led to a harmonisation of curricula for selected regulated professions (Hackl 2001: 8). Following a ruling of the European Court of Justice, any discrimination against students from other EC countries based on grounds of nationality was deemed unlawful. In some countries this meant that fee regimes had to be restructured to ensure that students from other EC countries paid the same fees as national students (Shaw 1999: 564). And last but not least, Community programmes provided member states and higher education institutions with financial incentives for convergence. Although based on voluntary cooperation, in order to receive funding participants had to comply with certain rules, such as the introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) (Berggreen-Merkel 2000: 78). Quite apart from this, Community programmes, and ERASMUS in particular, played an important role in raising awareness among higher education institutions as well as citizens, they fostered inter-university cooperation and, above all, markedly increased student mobility (Field 1998: 46f.). While the latter was a desired outcome of the cooperation, member states also had to realise that they did not have things under as much control as they would have liked. This may explain at least part of their fear that cooperation within the EU would eventually lead to harmonisation, or at the very least a

loss of sovereignty, based on the assumption that the European Commission would constantly try to expand Community competences in that area.

As the negotiations on the Bologna Declaration showed, smaller countries such as Finland or Ireland were less fearful of EU cooperation and favoured the involvement of the European Commission. Given their experience with the Sorbonne Declaration, such countries were wary of purely intergovernmental cooperation and feared being marginalised or simply left out. The French Minister Allègre and his UK colleague Blackstone, on the other hand, seem to have had particularly strong feelings against any form of Commission involvement, which they made very clear during the negotiations. As a result, the reference to EU cooperation was deleted and the European Commission was excluded from cooperation.

Building upon EU cooperation and going beyond

With hindsight we can say that the ‘victory’, which the two ministers secured at the Bologna meeting, did not last very long. The European Commission soon became an active member of the Bologna Process and generally speaking the Bologna Process and the EU framework became interlinked in many ways.

Participating countries

First of all, we have to keep in mind that in 1999, all of the then 15 EU member states were also part of the Bologna Process. The remaining 15 participating countries were associated and EFTA/EEA countries that were involved in EU higher education cooperation through their participation in the EU education programmes SOCRATES and TEMPUS. So all countries participating in the Bologna Process were closely linked to the EU in one way or another, which is why at that time the Bologna Process could still be regarded as a kind of EU cooperation. In a sense the Bologna Process anticipated developments within the European Union by already including future EU members as well as ‘quasi members such as Norway or Switzerland. At the same time it can be argued that EU higher education cooperation paved the way for the Bologna Process.

Common issues

Many issues dealt with by the Bologna Process had already been raised within the EU. The overarching aim of the Bologna Declaration was ‘to establish the European area of higher education’ in order to further both mobility and employability in Europe, as well as the international competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education. To achieve

this, several more specific objectives were set, most notably the ‘adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees essentially based on two main cycles.’ Other ‘action lines’ identified by the Bologna Declaration included the establishment of a system of credits, such as ECTS and the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance.

The overarching aim of mobility has been *the* central issue of EU higher education cooperation for decades, with the introduction of ECTS as an important measure to facilitate mobility. EU initiatives have constantly emphasised the importance of mobility and have greatly contributed to turning mobility into a central issue of European cooperation. The greater the demand for mobility, though, the more visible also became the problems and shortcomings, for instance with regard to the recognition of degrees and study periods. So EU cooperation was also important in highlighting the need for joint action to deal with those kinds of problems. In the 1990s the question of quality assurance then also became an increasingly important item on the EU higher education agenda and again, the EU paved the way for Bologna initiatives by raising awareness. The only thing that had not been dealt with by an EU initiative before, at least not on such a general level, was the question of degree structures. Here the EU’s activities (linked to the realisation of the internal market) have been limited to regulated professions.

To conclude, we can say that the Bologna Process in many ways built upon EU higher education cooperation and it did so not only with regard to the issues dealt with but also when it comes to steering structures.

Steering structures and funding

In fact, EU member states used their (positive and negative) experiences with EU cooperation to develop (similar or better) rules and procedures for the Bologna Process. As no structures had been established at the Bologna meeting, the follow-up of the Bologna Declaration was first discussed at ministerial level at an informal meeting of EU Education Ministers under the Finnish Presidency in the second half of 1999. At this meeting it was agreed that the EU Presidency should take charge of the follow-up process and that two groups would be set up to prepare the next ministerial conference. The bigger group consisted of all participating countries and representatives from the Confederation of European Union Rectors’ Conferences and the Association of European Universities (CRE). The smaller group was composed of the respective EU Presidencies in the run-up to the next conference (Finland, Portugal, France, and Sweden), the Czech Republic as host country of the next conference,

and again the Confederation and CRE (interview 21 June 2005, Oslo; interview 14 July 2005, Prague).

There was discussion about what to do with the European Commission since it had been virtually kicked out of the Bologna meeting. At first, there was an informal agreement that the Commission would be allowed to attend both groups as a silent observer (interview 14 July 2005, Prague). At the Prague ministerial meeting in May 2001 it was then decided to formally accept the Commission as an additional full member (see Prague Communiqué 2001). So the Commission certainly is in a position to influence the direction of the Bologna Process, even more so as it is one of the main grant giving bodies. The Bologna Process does not have a specific budget and therefore depends on the support of individual countries and organisations like the Commission and the Council of Europe. The Commission uses the SOCRATES programme (occasionally also TEMPUS) to fund Bologna conferences, seminars, reports and projects. This means, however, that in most cases, of the 45 Bologna countries only the 32 countries participating in SOCRATES are eligible. The Commission's support can at times be crucial for the survival of an initiative, especially if it comes from a nongovernmental organisation such as the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) or the European University Association (EUA)⁴, and the decision on whether or not to provide financial support again depends on the political priorities of the Commission (interview 26 July 2005, Brussels).

Generally speaking, participating countries as well as other organisations involved in the process view the Commission's role as supportive, both in the sense of the financial support it provides and in the role it plays during meetings. The Commission tries to build a consensus and to make the process move forward. For this reason, the Commission also tends to support the Presidency because by and large it is seen as 'the best way of getting a positive outcome of these meetings' (interview 26 July 2005, Brussels).

In fact, the Presidency plays a very important role in the Bologna Process. Its influence may have been weakened with the establishment of a Bologna Secretariat in 2003, but it remains very strong. The main tasks of the Presidency are to prepare and chair the meetings of the two main bodies, the Bologna Follow-up Group, comprising all participating countries as well as governmental and nongovernmental organisations, and the smaller Board, both of which meet at least once during each Presidency. As the Presidency steers the discussion and controls the agenda, it has considerable power to influence the direction of the process. Even in the six months before and after the actual Presidency, the country has a stronger influence

⁴ The *European University Association* (EUA) resulted from the merger of *Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences* and *Association of European Universities* (CRE) in March 2001.

on the Bologna Process than an average participating country, since the preceding and following Presidencies are also part of the Board. The Board's main task is to prepare the meetings of the bigger Bologna Follow-up Group. Although non-EU countries can also become a member, they need to be elected (and to compete with other EU countries), whereas the Troika countries get there automatically, which means that EU countries tend to be overrepresented.

So there is no doubt that the EU (that is, EU cooperation, EU member states, the EU Presidency, and the EU Commission) has an important influence on the Bologna Process and that EU member states have possibilities to steer the process that non-EU countries do not have. What does that mean for the Bologna Process? What are the implications for the Bologna Process on the one hand and EU cooperation on the other?

Implications

One manifestation of this EU influence on the Bologna Process is, for instance, that EU discussions are carried into the Bologna forum. The danger here is that the Bologna Follow-up Group ends up discussing issues that do not apply to one third of the participating countries. This is particularly obvious when it concerns rulings of the European Court of Justice. When it comes to EU initiatives, the situation is slightly different. First, these initiatives may also be relevant for non-EU countries. Second, there are a number of countries that see the Bologna Process as 'stepping stone' toward EU membership; they may find it interesting to be able to follow EU discussions while not being a member yet. Last but not least, discussing EU initiatives within the Bologna framework gives stakeholders as well as participating countries (whether EU members or not) the opportunity to give feedback, to try to influence the direction of EU developments from a 'Bologna perspective'.

The European Commission itself also gets inspired by the Bologna Process. As a consequence, it has initiated several new projects directly related to the Bologna Process, such as the employment of Bologna promoters. Moreover, the Commission has incorporated the Bologna Process into its neighbourhood policy and promotes Bologna reforms in neighbouring countries. It also happens that the European Commission takes up elements of the Bologna Process to use them for their own initiatives, for example the Copenhagen process in vocational training or the proposal for a European Qualifications Framework (see below). In short, it is a two-way process, the agendas of Bologna Process and EU cooperation overlap and influence each other. Given that the Bologna Process and EU higher education

cooperation deal with very similar issues and to a large extent involve the same countries, it is important that activities and initiatives in both forums are coordinated.

It can, however, also come to tensions, if for instance Commission proposals for the EU are perceived as conflicting with plans under the Bologna Process. To give an example, in May 2005 Ministers involved in the Bologna Process adopted an overarching 'Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area' describing the achievements and abilities to be expected at the end of the first, second and third cycle of higher education (bachelor/master/doctorate) respectively (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Framework 2005). In July 2005, the European Commission started a consultation procedure for a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) comprising eight levels of qualifications, including higher education but also vocational training and school education. Although the Commission emphasised that compatibility between the two initiatives would be ensured (Commission 2005: 8), many participants of the Bologna Process saw the EQF as a threat to the Bologna framework or feared that the existence of two (possibly inconsistent) frameworks would lead to unnecessary confusion (see, for instance, EQF - Responses to the Consultation). At the time of writing, the EU framework on lifelong learning has yet to be adopted but it is expected that a consensus will eventually be reached.

Another problem results from the fact that not all participating countries of the Bologna Process are eligible for EU funding. There are already huge differences between the different participating countries in terms of financial resources, administrative capacities etc. It would be good if at least they had the same opportunities to apply for European funding – which after all would be of great symbolic importance. Similar problems exist when it comes to stocktaking and data collection. The stocktaking done in the Bologna Process mainly relies on the work of Eurydice, the EU information network on education, but again it only covers two thirds of the countries, which means it is very difficult to get comparable data for all participating countries of the Bologna Process.

These problems or risks should, however, not be exaggerated. It would not be fair to say that the Bologna Process is just another form of EU governance. Although building on the EU framework in various ways, it is based on non-binding intergovernmental cooperation outside the EU. 20 of the 45 participating countries are not members of the EU (one of them being Russia) and governmental and nongovernmental organisations like the Council of Europe, ESIB or EUA also play an important role in steering the process. Moreover, EU countries and the EU Presidency in particular do make an effort to integrate non-EU countries and to stress

that the Bologna Process is not part of the EU. The Council of Europe and interestingly enough the European Commission as well play an important role here, too.

When we look at the implications the Bologna Process has for EU cooperation, we may find that European Commission can now talk more freely about issues that used to be taboo, like the degree structure for instance, and can consequently become more active in the field of higher education in general. At the same time you can still sense a certain resistance or caution on the part of the member states when it comes to EU higher education initiatives. Moreover, within the EU you also have the Lisbon process, which also has an impact on higher education policy, so that it is difficult to tell which changes are due to which process. This certainly is something that needs to be studied more closely - to what extent can we really see a change in the position of member states and if there is change, is it due to the Bologna Process or a consequence of the Lisbon process?

Conclusions

The Bologna Process resulted from an initiative that was primarily meant to facilitate the domestic reform of higher education systems and therefore represents a clear case of a two-level game. It is just another example of how national policymakers try to use European politics to escape domestic constraints. They did so outside of the dominant EU framework so as to avoid a loss of sovereignty or even standardisation, and in order to maintain full control over the process. This choice appears all the more logical when we take into account that the main purpose of the Sorbonne initiative was not to establish European cooperation but rather to facilitate domestic reform.

When it came to deciding on the form of cooperation, size mattered. First of all, the French Minister Allègre made the Sorbonne Declaration an initiative of the four big countries only, assuming that the smaller countries would follow suit anyway. In a sense he was right, although the other countries did not follow as swiftly as he may have expected. In fact, it can be argued that parts of the dynamic development of the Bologna Process can be attributed to the indignation of smaller EU states about having been sidelined. Second, we saw that smaller countries were more willing to cooperate within the EU framework, or at least to support the involvement of the European Commission, than were the larger ones. In the end, it was again two big countries that got their way: the Bologna Process was established outside the EU framework and initially excluded the Commission.

Still, the Bologna Process and EU cooperation quickly became intertwined in many ways. First, all EU member states are part of the process and use their experience from EU

cooperation when participating in it. Second, the Commission soon became a full and active member of the process as well as an important grant giving body and hence has the possibility to influence the direction of the process. Moreover, the Commission prepares proposals within the EU that are linked to the Bologna Process, and the EU in general is active in many fields that are related to it in one way or another. Last but not least, the EU Presidency was assigned a leading role in the Bologna Process. This shows that although the Bologna Process was deliberately initiated outside the EU, it still built upon the EU framework – not to integrate it into the EU, as is often speculated, but rather to create something new.

It will be interesting to see, given the perceived crisis of the EU and the growing number of countries that still want to join, whether we will witness more of this kind of cooperation, which is to say formally outside of but using the EU framework, and involving EU and non-EU countries as well as relevant stakeholders.

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