
Who's afraid of differences?

The tendency to converge higher education structures in times of diversity

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The Bologna process has initiated various reforms in each of the participating countries. Both at national and at European level, one has to reach decisions about the access to higher education, about study structures, programme duration, quality assessment, and ways of transition. Different assumptions on how to shape a higher education system lie behind those decisions, and there is a remarkable tension between preserving diversity on the one hand and the need for setting some definite standards on the other hand.

This contribution will focus upon programme duration in the new Bachelor and Master study courses at German higher education institutions, also taking into account the European debate.

Processes at European level

After the breakdown of the communist and socialist regimes in East Europe at the beginning of the 1990s, the European region became wider, but it was – and you might say it still is – far from being an integrated whole. At the same time, people began to realise that globalisation did not only raise new market opportunities, but also led to strong international competition, even in the educational sector and especially in higher education, where mobility and transnational supplies are much more common than in primary or secondary education. Furthermore and perhaps most important for the initiation of the so-called Bologna process was the situation in European higher education systems at that time.

In the decades before, three kinds of processes were characteristic for higher education systems in Europe:¹

- expansion, i.e. in general: the process of gaining more extent; and in particular: the process of increasing student numbers;
- differentiation, i.e. in general: the process of increasing differences; and in particular: the process of increasing differences between higher education institutions or study programmes;
- convergence, i.e. in general: the process of different objects or subjects coming towards each other, meeting at a point; and in particular: the process of different higher education systems becoming more similar.

In the 1950s and 1960s, educational experts had pointed out that there was a urgent need for modern societies to expand their higher education systems if they wanted to meet the demands of the labour market and to cope with growing international competition.

¹ For detailed information about expansion and differentiation in modern higher education systems, see Teichler 2005.

Especially in the 1970s, facilitating access to higher education was regarded as an important step in the equalisation of social chances. As a consequence, the numbers of entering students, enrolled students and graduates increased evidently, e.g. the number of students in higher education institutions in the Federal Republic of Germany rose from about 300,000 in the academic year 1960/61 to more than 830,000 students fifteen years later on.² There was some criticism on the further expansion of higher education in Europe, because economic growth slowed down, and the unemployment problem concerned even holders of academic degrees, which was a quite new phenomenon. But student numbers increased again in the 1980s, and '*massification of higher education*' seemed to be an adequate phrase for that development.

The expansion led to manifold differences at national level: New types of institutions and study programmes were established, new levels of qualification were inserted, new degrees were offered. Since European countries made only limited attempts to create common frameworks for teaching and learning at that time, the already multi-faceted picture of higher education systems became yet more detailed. That is to say that in the mid-90s, there were, as it is said in the Trends I-report, '*even more systems than countries in Europe*'.³

At the same time, there was a remarkable tendency to broaden the perspective, to consider also the international market situation instead of keeping insulated with the own system. For instance, some East European states, being in the process of remodelling their political systems, chose to align their higher education systems with the US-American model, and introduced a tiered study structure. Some Scandinavian countries like Denmark and Finland, too, decided to organise their study programmes in two cycles. But in general, that model was new to most European states, except for France, where study tiers had been existing for several years, although differently modelled in different types of higher education institutions, and the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, countries with a long tradition of cycled study structures.

Besides, many countries in Europe had to face serious problems in their higher education systems in the 1990s. Among others, there was concern about: increasing student numbers, but limited financial resources; average real study durations that exceeded the theoretical duration remarkably; deficient orientation of study programmes at labour market needs; poor quality of student service; missing of standardised quality assessment and quality improvement; high drop out rates, especially at Universities; and a low rate of foreign students, indicating a lack of attractiveness of the respective higher education system.

Representatives of governmental authorities and higher education institutions realised the necessity to initiate reforms at national and institutional level, and to strengthen the cooperation within the European region. In both cases, there was an underlying fear not to be able to sustain in the competition for students, graduates, researchers, teachers, and funding. Therefore, the attempts to reach agreements on a higher education reform at European level – considering that they would have strong impact at national and regional level as well – fell on fertile ground.

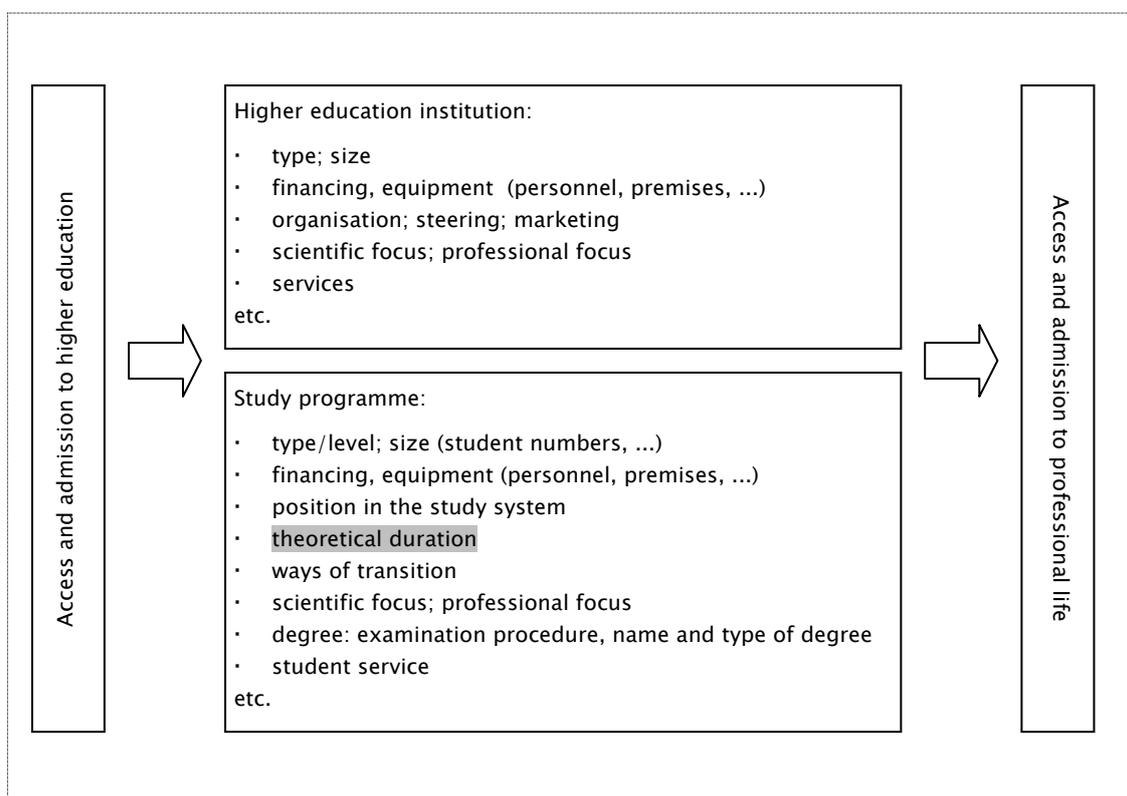
² Cf. Kehm 1999, p. 90.

³ See Haug 1999, section I.

The debate on study duration at European level

The subject of this paper is, as mentioned above, the debate on the notional duration of higher education study programmes in the context of Bologna reforms. Within the theoretical frame, the study duration can be regarded as one main area of differentiation in a higher education system (cf. Figure 1). With regards to content at European level, the topic is closely linked to other issues, like the mutual recognition of study degrees.

Figure 1. Areas of differentiation in a higher education system



Data on common frames for study duration or, to say it more generally, the extent of a course of study, can be found in official documents: in conventions and directives at European level as well as in the declarations and seminar results of the Bologna process. Additionally, some comprehensive reports, like those of the 'Trends' series, can provide useful information.

Study duration as a subject in documents

European conventions and directives

The Council of Europe (CoE) is an important political organisation, comprising 46 democratic European states today. The CoE has issued a number of conventions concerning the recognition of higher education qualifications, beginning in the early 1950s.

- In 1956, the 'European Convention on the Equivalence of Periods of University Study' was opened for signatories.⁴ Article 2 states that any contracting party shall recognise 'a period of study spent by a student of modern languages in a university of an-

⁴ CoE 1956.

other member country (...) as equivalent to a similar period spent in his home university provided that the authorities of the first-mentioned university have issued (...) a certificate attesting that he has completed the said period of study (...). The length of the period of study, as it is said further on, *'shall be determined by the competent authorities of the Contracting Party concerned'*, which is to say that no concrete measure was given. Also, the scope of this statement is limited to certain fields of study.

▪ In 1990, CoE published the 'European Convention on the General Equivalence of Periods of University Study'.⁵ Article 2 states that any signatory party shall recognise *'any period of study spent by a student in an institution of higher education of another Party as equivalent to a similar period spent in his or her institution of origin'*, provided that there has either been a previous agreement between the respective institutions or that the student has been awarded an appropriate certificate. Again, the length of the period of study *'shall be determined by the competent authorities of the Party on the territory of which the institution of higher education of origin is situated'*. Having opened the recognition process for all fields of study and also for non-university institutions, there is still no time specification.

▪ In 1997, CoE and UNESCO initiated an agreement on the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications, the **Lisbon Recognition Convention**.⁶ As of February 2006, 47 countries signed the convention, but not all of them ratified it – which is true, among others, for Germany.⁷ At the beginning of the document, the signatory countries state that the great diversity of education systems in Europe reflects its diversity in many aspects, *'an exceptional asset which should be fully respected'*. With regard to the recognition of study periods (Section V) as well as to the recognition of academic degrees (Section VI), it is said that each party, i.e. signatory country, shall recognise the corresponding qualification of any other party, unless *'a substantial difference can be shown between the qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification (...)*'.⁸ As an alternative, someone who completed a period or programme of study in another country should be enabled by his/her country to obtain an assessment of that qualification. In particular, the basis for a decision on recognition shall be based on the knowledge and skills certified for the respective qualification.

The European Communities – one of the three organisational pillars of the European Union – have published some official directives on professional education and training. The Directive 89/48/EEC describes a system for the recognition of higher education diplomas in regulated professions within the EU region.⁹ It is stated that someone who wants to pursue his/her profession in another EU member state may be allowed to do so in case he/she holds a diploma that certifies *'the completion of a course of studies lasting at least three years'*.

Documents in the Bologna process

▪ In May 1998, the **Sorbonne Declaration** was signed by four European Ministers, from France, Italy, United Kingdom, and Germany.¹⁰ Although it seems to be strange in

⁵ CoE 1990.

⁶ Lisbon Convention 1997.

⁷ Cf. CEPES 2006.

⁸ 'Higher education qualification' is defined as any *'degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of an education programme'* (p. 4). The meaning of a 'substantial difference' is not described in the Lisbon Convention.

⁹ EC 1988. The legal force of the document has been confirmed by a directive published in 2005.

¹⁰ Sorbonne Declaration 1998.

terms of names, this declaration, together with the Lisbon Convention, is considered to be the starting point of the Bologna process. The signers outlined a picture of an *'open European area for higher learning'*. The positive perspectives of such an area comprised the enhanced mobility of students and teachers, improved external recognition of study achievements, a higher grade of graduates' employability, and, last but not least, being more attractive at international level. In order to reach more internal and external readability, the Ministers aimed, as they say, at a *'progressive harmonisation'* of their study degree and cycle systems. They committed themselves to develop a common frame of reference for teaching and learning, *'of course respecting our diversities'*.

Cautious in their wording, the Ministers do not propose, but merely *'see emerge'* a system with two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. In the opinion of the signers, there should be a diversity of programmes for the first cycle, including multidisciplinary and language-oriented qualification, whereas research and autonomous work are the characteristics of the Master and doctorate programmes in the second study cycle. At both levels, the students should be encouraged to spend some time in another country than their own. The flexibility of such a system would be furthered mainly by the use of credits (such as in the European Credit Transfer System, ECTS) and the organisation of studies in semesters as well.

As an ideal for the future, the Ministers described *'a European area of higher education, where national identities and common interests can interact and strengthen each other for the benefit of Europe, of its students, and more generally of its citizens'*.

▪ As an important result of preparatory work for the follow-up Ministerial conference in Bologna, the project report *'Trends in Learning structures in Higher Education'*, later on known as **'Trends I'**, was completed in June 1999, some days before the Bologna conference was held. The report enclosed two parts: firstly, an essay on trends and issues in the European Economic Area (EEA) countries, and secondly, a comparative overview on characteristics of the respective national study systems.¹¹

In part one, the author states that a 3-5-8-model was frequently brought into play in the discussion about the new study structures, although the Ministers who signed the Sorbonne Declaration did not mention any time or duration for the two cycles, *'undergraduate'* and *'graduate'*.¹² Furthermore, the analysis of the EEA countries' higher education systems had shown that there was no convergence towards such a model: Study programmes at Bachelor level, whether traditional or new, required 3 to 4 years. At the time of 1999, all countries in the comparison were concerned with the introduction of a first study cycle, but none of them had a 3 years-system in all sectors or disciplines of higher education. Actually, degrees at Master level were mostly awarded after 5 years in total, whether in long study programmes without any option to degree in between, or in two-tiered combined programmes. But in case of those study programmes, the duration of each part differed from 2 to 4 years at Bachelor level and from 1 to 3 years at Master level. Again, at doctoral level, no convergence towards a standard duration of 8 years was found.

¹¹ In 1998/99, the EEA comprised all then 15 EU member states and three of the then four EFTA states (Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway).

¹² See the executive summary and section I in Haug 1999. The author assumes that the popularity of the 3-5-8-model was attributed to the *'Attali Report'*, a comprehensive analysis of the French higher education system which had been published in May 1998 at Paris, just equal to the Sorbonne declaration, regarding time and place.

Besides, as the author points out, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and the numerous other states outside the European region that had a tiered study system, differed considerably in terms of study duration and study structure; among one another, but also on the inside. Moreover, the extent of a study programme was rather expressed in academic credits than in semesters or years, that is to say, even the unit of measurement was different from what was customary in European states.

Though, the common characteristic was the tiered study structure, being *'so widespread around the world that not also having it would make continental Europe an ever more isolated island of relative incompatibility'*, as the author remarks. But a world-wide model for the length and structure of study courses did not exist at that time. Therefore, European countries, as the author concluded, should not think of 'the Anglo-Saxon' or US model and try to copy it, but invent an own system that would suit its own needs. The report includes a proposal for a *'common, but flexible frame of reference for qualifications'*, in which the duration of a study cycle is expressed in ECTS credits, with one year full-time study corresponding to 60 credits (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Proposal for a frame of qualifications, according to the Trends I-report, 1999

Study level	Required extent of completed full-time study, worth of ... ECTS credits		Degree
Sub-degree	1-2 years	60-120	certificate, diploma
First degree	3-4 years	180-240	Bachelor, Honours, ...
Master	≈ 5 years total, incl. 1 year at Master level	300	Master
Doctoral	≈ 7-8 years total; variable	420-480	PhD

Source: Haug 1999, Executive Summary and section III.

▪ In June 1999, ministerial representatives from 29 European countries signed the **Bologna Declaration**.¹³ The signers stated *'a growing awareness (...) of the need to establish a more complete and far-reaching Europe'*, with its educational systems as the paramount part. Greater compatibility and comparability of the European system of higher education met with the Ministers' ambition to increase its international competitiveness and thereby gain *'a world-wide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions'*.

In order to establish the European area of higher education, six primary objectives were defined and declared to be reached within the first decade of the third millennium, which is to say until 2010: the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate; the establishment of a system of credits, such as ECTS; the promotion of mobility for students as well as for teachers, researchers and administrative staff; the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance; and the promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

In the proposed two-cycle study system, the first cycle is expected to last for at least three years. The successful completion of that period of study would be the necessary condition for access to the second cycle (which leads to the Master's and/or doctorate degree), but it should also be accepted as an appropriate certificate for entering the European labour market. During the course of the consolidation of the European higher

¹³ Bologna Declaration 1999.

Education area, as the signers underlined, it shall be taken *'full respect of the diversity of (...) national education systems and of University autonomy'*.

After publishing the Bologna declaration, massive effort was put into the implementation of the reform ideas. At European as well as at national level, working groups were organised, numerous seminars and conferences took place. In most countries, the legislative foundation was adapted to the new study structures, and in every higher education system, teachers and administrative staff got involved in concrete reform measures.

▪ In May 2001, Ministers responsible for higher education from 32 European countries met in Prague. The Bologna Follow-up Group presented its **BFUG 2001**-report 'Furthering the Bologna Process' where it was stated that the adoption of a system mainly based on two cycles was one of the objectives of the Bologna declaration *'for which a consensus proved more difficult to reach'* and which *'has given way to the greatest diversity of interpretations'*. The authors described a significant trend for 3-year programmes, but said that there were many 4-year programmes as well. Besides, long one-tier programmes leading directly to a Master or similar degree still remained, especially in countries with a respective tradition and in subject areas with a strong relation to professions.¹⁴

Alike statements can be found in the '**Trends II**'-Report which is mainly based on a survey among ministerial representatives in 29 European countries.¹⁵ According to that document, the combined introduction of Bachelor's and Master's degrees, credits, and accreditation (*'the golden triangle of reforms'*) was planned in several countries. But on the whole, the huge variety of degrees and qualifications, together with numerous forms of bridges in between the study courses, led to diversified systems. That development, as the authors say, *'(...) points in the direction of a network, rather than a ladder of qualifications'*. Although there was a strong tendency towards 3 years-Bachelors, any European system needed to *'accommodate first degrees with diverse purpose, orientation and profile requiring the equivalent in credits of 3 to 4 years of full time study'*.

The **Prague Communiqué** which was signed by the Ministers in conclusion of the meeting, added three more aims to the list that had been set in the Bologna declaration: the development of strategies for lifelong learning; regarding both higher education institutions and students as competent partners in the Bologna process; and promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area to students from Europe and also from non-European states.¹⁶ With regards to the reform of study structures, it was noted that the implementation was valid for Universities and other higher education institutions as well in many countries. Furthermore, the signers underlined that degrees being provided at one level should be different in profiles. The Ministers committed themselves to continue their cooperation, *'building on the similarities and benefiting from the differences between cultures, languages and national systems (...)'*.

▪ In September 2003, the biannual Bologna follow-up conference was held in Berlin. Again, the BFUG as well as the European Association of Universities (EUA), the latter with support of the European Commission, presented a report about the ongoing trends and reform measures each.

¹⁴ Cf. Lourtie 2001, pp. 3 and 15. From then on, the BFUG prepared a report every two years, in order to present it at the ministerial conference. Usually, the results of all Bologna events that proceeded meanwhile are taken into consideration in the report.

¹⁵ Haug and Tauch 2001.

¹⁶ See Prague Communiqué 2001.

In the **BFUG 2003**-report, it is said that the common agreement to define a Bachelor level programme as a programme with the extent of 180 to 240 ECTS credits was confirmed, but that in the pre-Berlin period, much more attention has been given to the Master level. The majority of countries seemed to implement Master programmes with 90 to 120 ECTS credits, but still 60 credits was the accepted minimum.¹⁷ The first approach to tune the educational structures in Europe made it clear, as the author states, *'that the length of degree programmes (in terms of credits) is not an issue that stands by itself, but should be regarded as one crucial factor in the entire process of convergence of higher education: including the content, nature and level of study programmes.'* Therefore much effort should be given to the renewing of curricula at institutional level.

The authors of the '**Trends III**'-report, which is based on surveying representatives of ministerial authorities, higher education institutions, students, and employers, note with appreciation that degrees at Bachelor level are introduced in most European countries according to the 180-240 credits rule, even in higher education systems where other regulations had been in place before.¹⁸ While shorter first programmes could be defined as 'sub-degree level' without any difficulty, Bachelor programmes with more than 240 credits were regarded problematic. In the respective countries, as the authors say, *'there seems to be a deep conviction that no valid higher education qualification can be awarded after three years, notwithstanding the positive experiences of many other systems'*. At Master level, study programmes throughout Europe still varied significantly in duration and architecture, although there was a trend towards an extent of 300 credits. In combined programmes, the most common pattern was found to be 180 + 120 credits; some countries, e.g. Sweden, offered also 180 + 60 credits degree courses, but they reconsidered their structure *'so as to ensure compatibility'* with other European structures. A matter of discussion between British and continental higher education institutions was the UK tradition to assign 75 to 90 ECTS credits to their 1 year-Master, since the workload was calculated on the basis of a full calendar year.

The **Berlin Communiqué** was signed by ministerial representatives of 33 European states, and at that time, seven new members were welcomed to be part of the Bologna process. As the signers state, *'a comprehensive restructuring of the European landscape of higher education'* was under way.¹⁹ The signers committed themselves to start the restructuring of their study systems in 2005 at the latest, and to construct each *'a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications'*, where qualifications should be described in terms of level, workload, learning outcome, competences, and profile. As a rule, first cycle degrees should give access to second cycle programmes, whereas second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies. The BFUG was asked to explore how shorter study programmes might fit into the overarching European framework of qualifications that was aimed at. Furthermore, doctoral studies were to be integrated as third cycle programme in order to strengthen the connection between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) – a process which was defined as the Bologna action line number ten.

▪ Two years later, in September 2005, the Educational Ministers of the Bologna process member countries, now adding up to 45, met in Bergen. The authors of the corresponding **BFUG 2005-report** say that the Bologna action lines had tended to overlap and merge, thus they should not be regarded individually anymore, but in a broader con-

¹⁷ Cf. Zgaga 2003, pp. 43-45.

¹⁸ Cf. Reichert and Tauch 2003, pp. 47-48.

¹⁹ Berlin Communiqué 2003.

text.²⁰ The former action lines 1 to 3 (i.e. adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, adoption of a system mainly based on two cycles, establishment of a system of credits) and ‘an important part of 10’ (doctoral studies and the synergy between the EHEA and the ERA) were since then seen within the overarching framework of qualifications for higher education, with action line 7 (lifelong learning) also taken into account. Members of a specific working group developed such a European standard and presented it to the Ministers. The framework comprised three cycles, including the possibility for a sub-degree short cycle, descriptors for each cycle based on study outcome, and assigned credit ranges (see Figure 3, cf. also Figure 2).

As a result of information by the national rectors’ conferences and site visits in numerous institutions in Europe, the authors of the ‘Trends IV’-report state that, although considerable progress has been made in introducing a three cycle structure, there was still much work to be done regarding the clear definition of study aims and study outcomes, and concerning curriculum reforms.²¹ The process of changing the degree systems, as it is said, ‘is a highly complex cultural and social transformation that has set off a chain of developments with their own dynamics’. Furthermore, the authors note that, while study duration and respective altering can be described easily, the analysis of their significance and impact, e.g. ‘the acceptance of new first-cycle qualifications in society, the extent to which these new qualifications meet the needs of the labour market, and the implications of a pedagogical shift to student-centred learning’ was much more sophisticated. The employability of first cycle graduates emerged to be a crucial aspect in the reform process. Many representatives of higher education institutions, especially in countries with a traditional one-tier study structure, expressed their concern about the labour market opportunities of their Bachelor graduates.

Figure 3. The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, according to the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2005

Level of qualification	Outcomes (Qualifications that signify completion of the respective higher education cycle are awarded to students who ...)	ECTS Credits
Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle; > can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts; > have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems; > can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients; > have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy. 	≈ 120
First cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study; > can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study; > have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues; can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences; > have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy. 	typically 180– 240

²⁰ Cf. BFUG 2005, p. 9.

²¹ Cf. Reichert and Tauch 2005, p. 4 and pp. 10-19.

Second cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context; > can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study; > have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements; > can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously; > have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous. 	normally 90–120 (min. 60)
Third cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field; > have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity; > have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication; > are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas; > can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise; > can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society. 	not specified

Source: BWGQF 2005, pp. 193–197. [The text, except for the qualification descriptions, has been slightly shortened, and footnotes have been left out.]

The Ministers signing the **Bergen Communiqué** noted that the two-tiered study structure had been implemented widely, *‘with more than half of the students being enrolled in it in most countries’*.²² Nevertheless, as it says further on in the document, there were still obstacles to access between cycles, and in order to increase the employability of Bachelor graduates, the communication between the reform partners should be improved. The signers adopted the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA and committed themselves to develop compatible national frameworks each, having started by 2007. Doctoral studies should be completely aligned with the framework; the normal workload of a third cycle programme was considered to be 3 to 4 years full-time study. The European Higher Education Area, as the Ministers conclude, *‘is structured around three cycles, where each level has the function of preparing the student for the labour market, for further competence building and for active citizenship’*.

Processes and the debate on study duration in Germany

Documents at national level

Some time before a German Minister signed the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998, and thus before the publication of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, there was a growing debate at national level in Germany about the recognition of study phases and study degrees.

- In 1996, the German Rectors’ Conference (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*, HRK) gave out a recommendation entitled ‘Attractiveness by means of international compatibility’

²² Bergen Communiqué 2005. The Ministers refer to the report of the Bologna Working Group on Stocktaking, see: http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Bergen/050509_Stocktaking.pdf (23.05.05).

[transl.]. The higher education representatives were concerned about the fact that only few students from abroad opted for a course of studies in Germany. The main reason, as it was assumed, was the incompatibility of study structures, passages, and degrees with the ‘Anglo-American model’ which was then regarded as international standard. In the opinion of the rectors, more transparency and compatibility was needed, but it was definitely not necessary to change the study structure itself.²³

In contrast, the ‘Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder*’ (*Kultusministerkonferenz*, KMK) published a report with the title ‘Strengthening the international competitiveness of Germany as a location for higher education’ [transl.] in the same year. The political representatives claimed for an improvement of the situation at higher education institutions by means of a general structural reform of the system, including the introduction of internationally approved degrees like Bachelor and Master.

- In July 1997, the HRK published a resolution regarding the introduction of credit systems and study modules, but did not mention the study structure subject, whereas in November, the KMK representatives on their part laid down the first basic principles for implementing two-tiered programmes at German higher education institutions. Just some weeks later, the HRK seemed to have changed its opinion on the necessity of structural change, issuing a resolution ‘On the introduction of Bachelor and Master programmes/degrees’ [transl.].²⁴ With reference to the Anglo-American system, it is stated in the brief paper, 3 years- and 4 years-programmes should be distinguished at Bachelor level, while Master programmes may comprise 2 years (after a 3 years-B.) or 1 year (after a 4 years-B.). However, the individual institution or faculty should have the right to decide about the introduction.

- In August 1998, several months after the publication of the Sorbonne Declaration, the national higher education law in Germany was changed. All kinds of higher education institutions were now allowed to introduce programmes with a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree ‘on trial’.²⁵ By law, the first cycle should have an amount of minimum 3 years and maximum 4 years, whereas the standard period of study at second cycle has to be minimum 1 year and maximum 2 years. Combined study programmes should not exceed 5 years of full-time study. That is to say, the introduction of cycled studies was authorized by law in Germany before the Bologna Declaration was signed.

- In March 1999, the KMK published the first version of the so-called ‘Structural regulation’ [transl.] for Bachelor and Master programmes, a standard document which was subsequently slightly renewed. The version of October 2003 is still valid today, amended in 2005 by some regulation on study programmes in which there had been state examinations before.²⁶ The standards laid down in the document, as it is said in the preamble, shall ensure the formal equivalence of comparable study performance and degrees, and are considered as an important step towards the European Higher Education Area.

- According to the 2003 regulation, Bachelor and Master programmes may be implemented at Universities as well as at Universities of Applied Science; the differ-

²³ HRK 1996.

²⁴ HRK 1997.

²⁵ See HRG 1998, § 19. In later editions of the national law, the phrase ‘on trial’ was deleted.

²⁶ See KMK 2003 and KMK 2005a. In general, the KMK resolutions are not legally binding themselves, but the *Länder*, within the federal structure of the German state, are obliged to adapt their legal frameworks according to the content of the respective resolution.

ent educational goals are not put into question. An institution may offer a Bachelor programme without offering an associate Master programme, and vice versa. The Bachelor's degree is regarded the standard academic degree in a tiered study system.²⁷

The duration of programmes, as it is said further on, is constituted in the national higher education law (see above): 3-4 years at first cycle, 1-2 years at second cycle, and a maximum of 5 years in a combined Bachelor and Master programme. Institutions are not allowed to award a Master's degree after a first study cycle, regardless of its study duration. Neither should degrees at a certain level be differentiated according to the time of study. As a rule, 180 ECTS credits are assigned to a 3 years Bachelor's degree, and 300 credits in a whole are regarded adequate for graduating at Master level.

- In April 2005, KMK, HRK, and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) constituted a national framework of qualifications in higher education, which is modeled on the European frame, but is less detailed.²⁸ The frame criteria are to be understood, as the authors say, irrespective of the field of study and type of institution. For each study level, short descriptions are given, allocated to one of the three categories, 'knowledge and understanding', 'competences', and 'formal aspects'. The study duration, expressed in years as well as in ECTS credits, is one of those formal aspects. Unsurprisingly, the extent of study follows the national law regulation which is to say that 180 to 240 credits are regarded adequate for first level studies, and 60 to 120 credits for Master level studies. Since there is no legally binding duration of doctoral studies in Germany, there is no number of credits given at the third level of the qualification framework.

The actual decision on study duration

As mentioned above, the higher education institutions themselves had to decide on which time of study to assign to their new Bachelor and Master programmes. Interestingly, there was much less differentiation than one might have expected. On the contrary, the responsible persons at higher education institutions in Germany chose, practically without any arrangement, very similar patterns of study duration, especially regarding the first level.

- According to a survey that had been carried out in 2002/2003, the regular study duration in nearly 90 % of the Bachelor programmes in question was 3 years.²⁹ About 10 % had a theoretical duration of 3 ½ years, and only in 1 % of the cases, the duration was 4 years. One might have thought that especially suppliers of consecutive Bachelor and Master programmes were cautious at first cycle, in order not to exceed the overall limit of 5 years, but that suppliers of the "solo Bachelor", as they were called in the study, used their degree of freedom. Anyhow, the data proved caution on both sides (see Figure 4).

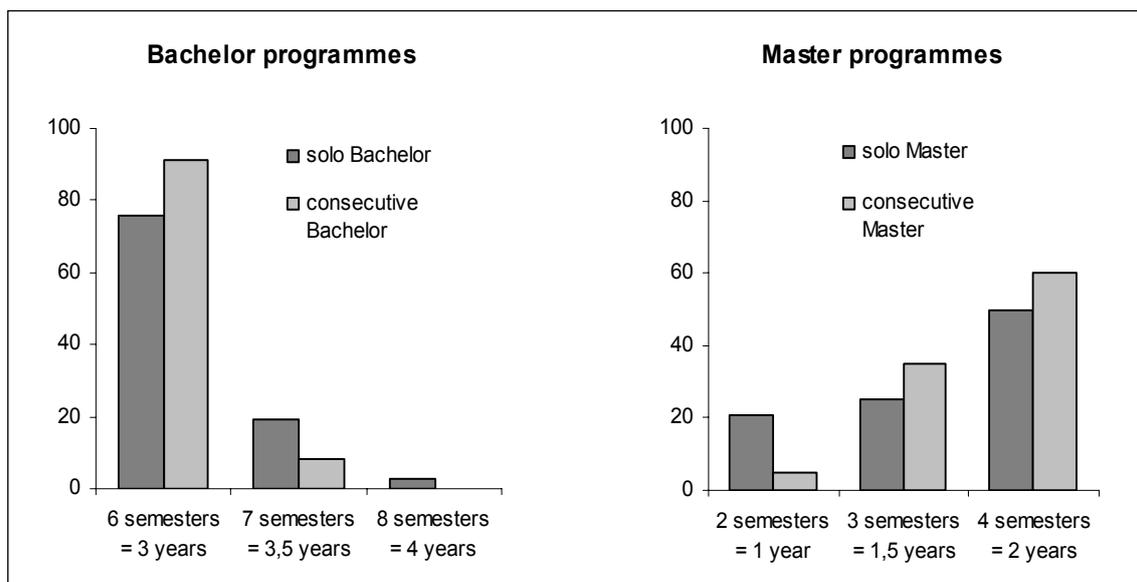
The situation was slightly different referring to the Master programmes. More than 50 % of the programmes in question had a theoretical time of study of 2 years, and one third had a duration of 1 ½ years. About 10 % were set out to be 1 year programmes.

²⁷ This statement initiated a highly controversial debate in Germany.

²⁸ See KMK 2005b.

²⁹ Cf. Schwarz-Hahn and Rehburg 2004, pp. 37-39.

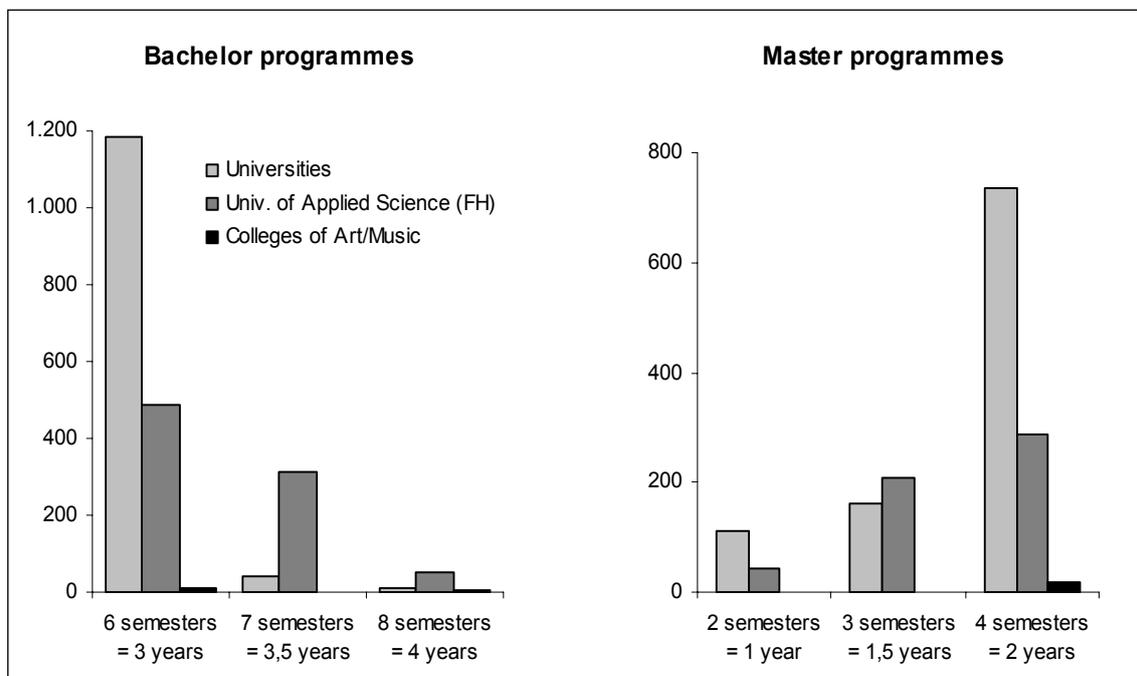
Figure 4. Regular time of study of Bachelor and Master programmes in Germany, according to a survey, 2002/03 (by type of programme, in %)



Source: Schwarz-Hahn and Rehburg 2004.

Regarding the group of consecutives programmes in the survey, one could see that the model ‘3 years-Bachelor + 2 years-Master’ was predominant (60 %), followed by the ‘3 years-Bachelor + 1 ½ years-Master’ model (about 30 %). The 1 year-Master was practically non-existent in this group.

Figure 5. Regular time of study of Bachelor and Master programmes in Germany, 2005/06 (by type of institution, in numbers)



Source: HRK-Hochschulkompass, 1 September 2005, according to HRK 2005.

- The picture did not change very much over the last few years. According to current statistics, nearly 80 % of the Bachelor programmes at higher education institutions in Germany have a regular study duration of 6 semesters, with 180 ECTS credits assigned. Above 60 % of the Master programmes are set out to be 4 semesters, with 120 credits assigned.³⁰

But a closer look at the data reveals remarkable differences between the two main types of institutions in Germany, Universities (*Universitäten*, U) and Universities of Applied Science (*Fachhochschulen*, FH), see Figure 5. Whereas nearly 40 % of the FH-Bachelor programmes – mainly in the fields of Engineering and Science – have a theoretical duration of 7 semesters, only 3 % of the U-Bachelor degrees rely on that model. Accordingly, the proportion of 3 semesters-Master programmes is twice as high at *Fachhochschulen* than at *Universitäten* (36 % compared to 16 %). The reason for this may be found in the different traditions of the two types of institutions in the German higher education system.

The situation at different types of higher education institutions

- A traditional study programme at a *Fachhochschule* has, as a rule, a theoretical duration of 4 years. In some fields of study, e.g. in Engineering, this includes not only full-time study at the institution, but also one or two semesters of external practical work. Here, the conversion to the new study structure appears to be relatively soft and unproblematic. Regarding the time aspect alone, the difference between the traditional 4 years-Diploma, including external work, and a 3 years or 3,5 years-Bachelor programme is rather small. As regards content, the average study at a *Fachhochschule* is, compared to a University programme, more closely connected to the professional world. So it might be easier for study suppliers at *Fachhochschulen* to qualify their students theoretically as well as professionally within the first cycle of study.

- In contrast to this, a traditional study programme at a *Universität* has a theoretical study duration of 9 or 10 semesters, with a basic phase (*Grundstudium*) of 4 semesters and a principal phase (*Hauptstudium*) of 5 or 6 semesters. The two phases are regarded as one long cycle, and the certificate which is awarded in between, the *Vordiplom*, has no professional relevance. The main aim of the basic phase is to impart theoretical knowledge in the major subject and, if applicable, in minor subjects as well. In the principal phase, the student usually specialises in a certain field. There might be a kind of professional orientation, but that is not necessarily the case. Thus, it is quite a large step from the traditional 4,5 years- or 5 years-programme towards a tiered study structure.

As a consequence, it was and maybe still is a common phenomenon at German Universities to transform a traditional degree programme into a consecutive programme with two degrees, the first one awarded to students who completed the basic phase and a Bachelor thesis, and the second one to students who passed their final Master exam after the principal phase. According to German higher education law, institutions are allowed to run their traditional and new-tiered study programmes in parallel, but it is not clear how many institutions proceeded that way.³¹ One might also argue that it is no problem

³⁰ Cf. HRK 2005, pp. 12-13.

³¹ In the 2002/2003 survey, only about one third of the suppliers of consecutive BM programmes – which are most prominent at Universities – said that they developed a new study course, whereas two thirds indicated there had been a traditional course of study which was taken as a basis for the consecutive programme. In more than 50 % of the cases, the institutional representatives stated that, addi-

in terms of *form* – which is true, but does not meet the point. As regards *content*, a proceeding like the one described above means that the first study phase imparts mostly theoretical knowledge, whereas official documents at European and national level clearly state that a first cycle-degree like the Bachelor must be professionally orientated, at least to a certain extent, and has to qualify the students for the labour market.

The position of the TU 9 consortium

In this context, the position of the so-called ‘TU 9’-Initiative led to an intense debate in Germany. In 2003, nine Technical Universities united as ‘TU 9 – Consortium of German Institutes of Technology’, mostly concerned with higher education in the field of Engineering. In October 2004, the initiative submitted a press release in which the members stated: ‘The Bachelor’s degree opens all doors, the Master’s degree is the target.’ [transl.]³² A Bachelor programme at a University, as it is argued, shall mainly lead to the Master programme within the same discipline, and may also allow for a change of the study subject or for professional work. But only the Master study at a University should be seen as the ‘regular degree’ for professional occupation, in the academic area as well as in trade and industry – a statement which was, in the opinion of the TU 9-members, justified by ‘the success of the traditional model’.

The members not only declared their position, but also signed a declaration in which they agreed upon a mutual recognition of their degrees. Furthermore, the graduates are invited to ‘support that new profile also by bearing the name of the University in their academic title’.³³ The TU 9 position met with approval of, among others, the main federation of University professors in Germany (*Deutscher Hochschulverband*, DHV), who said that the KMK should listen to experts instead of promoting the Bachelor’s degree as the standard higher education degree.³⁴ By no means could a Bachelor student in the opinion of the DHV be sufficiently qualified for the labour market, and what was expected from a graduate could only be imparted in a Master study programme.

Study duration at Colleges of Art and Music

Strong resistance against the tiered study structure with shorter degree programmes was also expressed by higher education representatives in those fields of study where a state examination was the traditional form of graduation. The German Colleges of Art and Music (*Kunst- und Musikhochschulen*) can be classified as Universities, and they offer comprehensive study programmes, leading to a state-approved degree.

Whereas many common Universities had, despite some mistrust, introduced tiered study programmes in the following of the 1998 legislation, the Colleges of Art and Music almost completely refused to change their study structures. Interestingly, by a 2005 amendment to the KMK’s ‘Structural regulation’, those Colleges are allowed to implement 6 years-programmes. Although it is meant ‘as an exception’ and must be proceeded ‘according to the particular regulation in federal state law’, it is an astonishing concession to the institutions, even evading the national higher education law framework. Obviously, there were misgivings at political side that, without such a compromise, the Colleges of Art and Music would not have agreed on the study reforms at all.

tional to the Bachelor’s or Master’s degree, other degrees were awarded in the respective programme. Cf. Schwarz-Hahn and Rehburg 2004, pp. 40-43.

³² See TU 9 2004.

³³ According to German civil law, one is not permitted to complement or change an educational title.

³⁴ See DHV 2004.

Study duration in the view of employers

In this section, the view of employers on the study duration in Bachelor and Master programmes in Germany will be outlined. The information is based on an analysis that had been carried out by the author in 2005.³⁵

While, on the one hand, several higher education representatives doubt that a scientific study within a time frame of 3 years is possible at all, employers' representatives, on the other hand, have been complaining for years about the long duration of study (and thereby, they do not only refer to the actual study time, but also to the theoretical study duration) and about the comparably high age of graduates entering the labour market. Among other things, that criticism accelerated the introduction of Bachelor and Master programmes at German Universities.

The empirical surveys that have been subject to secondary analysis provide several different results as regards the aspect 'study duration'.³⁶ In some of the surveys, business representatives prefer young graduates, entering the labour market as early as possible, in order to be able to exert more influence on their professional development. In other studies, the representatives stated by the majority that a grounded scientific education, supplemented by imparting key qualifications, was much more important than a lower graduates' entering age. Mostly, it seems to be a question of balance between study duration and study content: Which qualification profile can be realised in what regular time of study?³⁷

Within this diversity of assessments, at the side of higher education as well as at the labour market, there is a trend among business representatives to be sceptical as regards the University Bachelor's degree. Several employers showed only limited confidence in the reform willingness of Universities, and therefore the University Bachelor may be seen as a 'prevented graduate', someone who would not have been able to complete a traditional University *Diplom* programme, but has now, within the new tiered study structure, the opportunity to obtain an academic degree anyhow.

This kind of scepticism is strengthened by official positions like those of the TU 9-consortium (see above) who give the impression that a Bachelor study programme is only the first part of the actual programme, leading to a Master's degree.

Other business representatives were less concerned. They merely saw pleasant new opportunities for the future: Bachelor graduates with scientific knowledge and some other key competences will be recruited for professional tasks where, at the beginning, a higher qualification is not necessary, and if the graduates are willing and able to do so, there are many ways to further education, among others, a Master study programme.

³⁵ See Rehburg 2006. The publication is entitled 'Higher education reform and the labour market' [transl.]. Methods applied in the study comprised documentary analysis (official statements and position papers), a secondary analysis of 17 empirical research studies, and four case studies for which several business representatives have been interviewed.

See also Alesi et al. 2005 and the Euredocs conference paper by Bettina Alesi.

³⁶ Cf. Rehburg 2006, pp. 202-203.

³⁷ Once at a conference, a professor reported the following: Attending herself a conference and giving a speech on the employability of graduates, she listed the competences that a graduate is expected to have nowadays: basic and specialised expertise, analytical and methodical competences, professional skills, practical experience, speaking foreign languages, IT competences, and social skills. Then somebody in the audience asked: 'And is he able to fly?'

Summary

Study duration as a subject at European level (before 1999)

When the recognition of a study period is concerned in the Council of Europe conventions, a 'similar period of study' is at stake, and the decision about the equivalence of periods is assigned to the responsibility of the respective institution. No concrete time spans are given, and phrases like 'duration' or 'length' do not appear in the documents.

In the Lisbon Convention, a principle appears which is now famous in European countries: The result, or, as it is often said: the output of a study programme (i.e. the graduate's knowledge and skills) is more meaningful than its form or input. Consequently, a formal criterion like the duration of study cannot say as much about the quality of the programme as its outcome. And another important principle shows up: respecting the diversity of European countries and their educational systems. Europeanization therefore does not mean uniformity.

In the legal framework of the EU member states, a 3 years time span seems to be the accepted length of a degree course. But this small hint remains the only one; as far as the author knows, there is no official document about mutual recognition of study programmes within the EU region.

Study duration as a subject in German higher education

The concerns about the lack of international attractiveness of the German higher education system gave reason for the reform movement, beginning in the mid-1990s and leading to the introduction of a tiered study structure.

Following 'the Anglo-Saxon model', it was initially planned to award a Bachelor's degree after 3 years, a Bachelor Honour's degree after 4 years, and a Master's degree after exactly 1 or 2 years of full-time study. But the Federal Government decided to constitute rather a frame for the study duration of each level, i.e. 3 to 4 years at first degree level, and 1 to 2 years at second level, with a maximum of 5 years in combined programmes. This regulation has been adopted by all German federal states. Therefore, the decision about the actual study duration of the new programmes was virtually in the hands of the higher education institutions.

Whereas the Universities of Applied Science decided to install as well 3 years- and 3 ½ years-programmes at Bachelor level, the Universities adopted the '3 years'-model practically without exemption. At the same time, whereas Master programmes at *Fachhochschulen* have a theoretical duration of 1 ½ years or 2 years at nearly the same rate, the *Universitäten* opted again for only one version, i.e. the '2 years'-model. And this pattern has not become visible just recently, but was quite clear from the beginning, which might be settled at the point when the higher education law amendment became effective in 1998.

This phenomenon should be regarded in context with the deep-rooted tradition of long, one-tiered study at German Universities: Quite often, the established University programmes have been transformed into consecutive Bachelor and Master programmes, structured each very similarly to the traditional course of study, with a basic phase of now 3 years, and a principal phase of some more 2 years.

Hence, the decision on the theoretical length of a study programme, lying in the responsibility of the institutions themselves, is dependent on

- tradition
- and feasibility,

and this combination has led to remarkable differences between Universities and Universities of Applied Science, which is to say that the type of institution plays an important role in this aspect, at least as far as the German higher education system is concerned.

At the same time, the decision was not much discussed; it seemed to be more or less regarded as a natural development, with two exceptions on either side. In some disciplines at the *Fachhochschulen*, there is a debate going on whether to keep or to hive off the semesters of external practical work, and there had been a short discussion at the *Universitäten* about the recognition of German 3 years-Bachelor's degrees in the United States of America, where first cycle programmes mostly comprise 4 years of study.

But by and large, the prior point in the actual decision on the regular study duration is *not* the international recognition of study phases and study degrees, or the increase of international attractiveness of the German higher education system – although these arguments gave reason to the reform movement in the beginning. In contrast, since the beginning, it was mostly a question of, as has been said above, tradition and cost-benefit calculation.

Study duration as a subject at European level (1999 ff.)

In this paper, it is not asserted that what has been told about the situation in Germany is true for other European countries as well. But it is assumed that, when national traditions and cost-benefit calculations meet like they do in the Bologna process, even those aspects that had not been much under discussion at national level will, at international level, initiate a debate on principles. Generally speaking, the Bologna member countries had to pass the following stages and discussion points:

- Description of the starting position: To which extent are the study systems internally differentiated, and how much diversity can be seen at European level?
- Description of individual aims: What model is favoured by the different countries, and why? To what extent are tradition and feasibility considerations important for the decision? And international standards?
- Agreement on targets = Definition of a common aim: Assumed that there is readiness to reach an agreement at European level, where do the different attitudes meet? Where is the intersection between the various ideal models? What is the least common denominator?
- Agreement on procedures: How can the individual systems be converged to the extent that has been agreed upon? Which measures should be taken at national and at European level?

As regards the topic of study duration, the Bologna process members debated intensely about the common aim. There was, for example, a highly emotional discussion between representatives of the United Kingdom and Sweden, each persisting on their traditional system, i.e. 4 years- respective 3 years-programmes at Bachelor level.

Anyhow, there is no official document at European level that defines a discrete figure for the study time at a particular cycle. Instead, according to the different traditions in the member countries and the intense debate on the subject, the working group who developed the European framework of qualifications and also the Ministers who accepted it, decided to choose a range of credits for degrees at first and second level each. So there is neither a concrete reference point for each cycle nor is the theoretical study duration expressed in time units, but merely in credits (although an amount of 60 credits, in turn, is regarded equivalent to one year of full-time study).

Final remark

The process of a convergence of structures in the European Higher Education Area is far from being terminated. Now that a common frame of reference has been found, in general as well as regarding the duration of study programmes, the Bologna member countries become aware of the fact that those decisions of a principal kind are necessary and valuable, but still not sufficient. Merely, they can be regarded as initial points for even more concentrated work on content and proceeding, at national level and at European level. The endeavour is hopefully aimed at the students' qualification for professional life.

In terms of the regular duration of study cycles, the representatives of the Bologna member countries seem to be, after all, not too much afraid of differences – at least not afraid enough to overcome national traditions and ideals. The tendency to converge study structures in times of diversity is strong, but at the same time finite. Time will show whether decisions on study content will induce new conclusions about study duration.

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