

Time to stop beating around the bush A German perspective on national standards in the Bologna Process

Peter Wex

Biographical note

Dr. Peter Wex is head of the section “Law and development in HE”, Department of Education and Psychology at the Freie Universität Berlin. Prior to that he was Chief Executive of Administration (law, personnel and budget) at various universities. Now he is a researcher with profound knowledge of the Bologna Process. He is author of the basic volume in Germany concerning the implementation of bachelor and master. Contact by E-mail: wex@zedat.fu-berlin.de

It is undeniable that in Germany today higher education cannot be as it was in Humboldt’s day two hundred years ago. The mass university, together with social and politico-educational challenges, has created problems which require fundamental and lasting solutions. The key question is: how can the transformation from the industrial age to our knowledge society be organised?

In relation to HE, European politicians have tackled this issue by adopting the principles of the Anglo-Saxon system. This transformation is not fully accepted, or is actually rejected, by a high percentage of students and academic staff. The following three aspects are to varying degrees relevant to this:

- the European HE system will be fully implemented by 2010;
- difficulties of adaptation and adjustment are increasing, so that the whole process of reform is undermined;
- as the advantages and disadvantages of the Bologna Process become clearer, they give rise to separate national processes of reform.

The Bologna Process does not have an end in itself. It has no theoretical framework. The original intention was to create a unified European area for higher education in order to harmonise HE systems. Nowadays this development includes the efforts of HEIs to increase competitiveness and raise the profile of European HE. Only in this way can Europe prepare for world-wide competition.

Why cannot these aims be achieved by means of reforms at national rather than European level?

HEIs as institutions and academics as individuals may well be reluctant to hear the answer – that the following aims, for example, have still not been achieved through conventional educational systems: to offer qualifications relevant for the labour market; to increase international competitiveness; and to provide comparability in final examinations. Or more pointedly, the introduction of the Bologna Process has a greater chance of success since for decades national efforts at reform have been comparatively unsuccessful.

As far as the actual development of the German higher education system is concerned, it is demonstrable that unsolved ‘problems’ required the intervention of legislation (in 1998). These problems were: courses of study were too long; the international attractiveness of Germany as a place to study was decreasing; and there was no comparability between courses and qualifications

at German HEIs. A sharp distinction may be made between myth and reality in the assumptions which have influenced the development of post-war HE in Germany. The myths explain the permanent backlog of reforms which has built up, why it seems impossible for us to resolve them ourselves, and why the adoption of another system appears to be the only way forward.

The first myth is that all German HEIs are of equal standing (Mittelstrass 1994). Without even considering structures and results, student numbers or facilities, and without differentiating between staff and student populations, the myth of equal value of all HEIs has been maintained. There is a puzzling notion that colleges for higher professional training (Hochschulen) are different from but equal to universities. This view was rightly castigated by the German Academic Council (Wissenschaftsrat) in 2000 as an impediment to long-term progress. And yet there are already considerable differences in image and results between individual colleges and certain subjects. The agonising over 'elite universities' simply demonstrates the disadvantages with regard to international competition of a system which claims equal value without being prepared to differentiate.

More important is the myth of full-time study. Courses in Germany are conceived on the basis that every student will complete a full-time course, and the length of the course and the resources required are calculated accordingly. This assumption affects the laws on child allowance, maintenance grants, taxes, the federal law on support for education and training, student health insurance and social allowances. But here too reality tells a completely different story. At a realistic estimate thirty per cent of students are in fact studying part-time, and this proportion is increasing, with consequent effects on the way in which students learn and way courses are organised.

The greatest myth of all is that of a fixed period of study. The intention of a time limit is to restrict the range of choice and academic content, with the norm set by a student of average ability pursuing a standard-length course for a professional qualification. But forty years' experience has shown that attempts at reform by requiring students to complete within a fixed period of time have been a failure. The average length of time taken to complete a degree course calculated over a cross-section of subjects is fourteen semesters, and between eleven and twelve semesters for a course of professional studies. In addition, there is an attrition rate through drop-out or change of course of some thirty per cent in the college sector and fifty per cent in the university sector.

Finally, in considering the attractiveness of Germany as a place to study, we have a diploma which is unknown elsewhere and offers no comparability with those outside Germany; and our own unique but problematic sacred cows of entrance regulations and exemption from fees.

The question is whether these defects, identified by countless educational experts, can be rectified by the introduction of the Anglo-Saxon graduation system.

A clear conclusion is yes: most of those countries who have adopted the Anglo-Saxon higher education system are free from the myths of equivalent value, exclusively full-time study and fixed-length courses – their education systems are determined by reality.

But the real question about the Bologna Process is whether the defects we have identified can be rectified simply by implementing the bachelor/master arrangement, or whether there is room for some national variations. Could the advantages of the Bologna Process be incorporated into our existing system? Although the German university tradition has been highly successful and the new Anglo-Saxon system hardly exists as yet, little or no thought has so far been given to modifying or partially adopting the new arrangements; strangely, and for reasons which might be considered elsewhere, only a full-scale replacement of the traditional system seems to be envisaged. For the moment, we should at least consider whether the undeniably advantageous structure of the Bologna Process could be made to work for or within the existing German system.

How might this look? Degree courses and institutions would have to become more differentiated, and courses for the new diploma would be organised in modules with a marking system based on credit points. Dividing a course of study leading to a professional qualification into two cycles presents a challenge to the traditionally undivided German HE system: the logic of such a division might imply that the centuries of German academic tradition have been on the wrong track.

It makes more sense academically to treat each discipline separately and to differentiate course length accordingly – long-term (eg science or engineering with ten semesters), short-term (eg business management with six semesters) and medium-term (eg education with eight semesters). The two-stage bachelor/master would be phased out in an integrated way and a decision taken as to long-, medium- and short-term studies. As these new concepts would contain general and subject-specific as well as academic and analytical elements, the new Diploma should be assessed as the equivalent of a combined bachelor's and master's degree.

All further (postgraduate) studies on offer would need to be differentiated between further, continuing and extension education. For state-regulated courses and other professional courses (teaching, medicine, law etc) each area would set its own specific requirements.

A high priority would be to dismantle the old-style courses and to introduce new syllabuses, fix realistic lengths of study and gear courses to the needs of the labour market. Differentiation between types of HEI would follow logically, with education taking place in elite universities, conventional universities, colleges of higher education, private colleges, specialist colleges and also by distance learning. In particular, professional training should be seen as orientated to practice and academically well-founded. (German Academic Council: Theses with regard to the future development of the academic system in Germany, 2000.)

Central to the success of such a system, and thereby also to the Bologna structure, is assessment. Course enrolment, structuring of courses, written examinations strictly relevant to course content, and acquisition of credits together with the possibility of re-sits within a defined period, all combine to guarantee completion within the set time. All this would give the student a clear indication of their own capabilities and assist their motivation.

What would be the advantages of such modularised study pathways and reformed course content? The outstanding benefit would be to remove the division of the conventional diploma into two consecutive parts. Representatives of each discipline would decide whether three, four or five years of study were required for a professional qualification in that field. (Discussions about this have revealed a certain lack of logic in current arrangements: if, for example, engineers stipulate that a certain professional qualification can be achieved only through five years of study, then it becomes clear that the first step, at bachelor's level, does not qualify the student to practise, and cannot be taken seriously – half an engineer? Half a teacher?)

The second important advantage is that the universities would gain increased control of academic education. They would be able to select their own students, care for them better through a modularised marking system based on credit points, and steer them through to graduation. At present, with the two-step bachelor/master system, the labour market or the requirements for study at master's level are the main influence.

A further advantage of incorporating the Bologna structure in the diploma relates to education in the humanities which has been cited many times in terms of unity of research and learning as well as its orientation to European intellectual history. Lack of such an orientation has been criticised in the Bologna Process (Nida-Rümelin 2005). Although no-one has shown conclusively which elements of intellectual orientation should form the basis of diploma studies, a modularised diploma undoubtedly offers the possibility of integrating educational and academic principles at the same time as following a utilitarian emphasis.

A fourth important argument relates to competitiveness. An attractive newly designed diploma with forward-looking content, guaranteed length of study and a high-standard final degree comparable to internationally recognised qualifications would allow Germany once again to be a serious contender in the global education market. The oft-quoted foreign student, usually from Asia and hungry for education, would no longer need to struggle through the two-step process when he or she could achieve a high-quality and internationally comparable degree through a single course of study. The language issue would remain however, as bachelor's and master's courses are still taught in German.

What are seen to be the disadvantages of this new concept?

The first objection is that a modular diploma is not comparable with the bachelor's and master's degrees known worldwide. This criticism is not fundamentally sound. If all teaching modules are carefully designed in content and scope and then translated into English then they become internationally comparable. This view is confirmed by the experiences of German graduates who are surprised to find they fail to gain university places abroad in spite of their formal qualification.

According to the second objection, graduates worldwide have a more general education at first degree level, with specialisation not until master's level or in the workplace. This argument is even less valid. If an employer can take a highly qualified graduate who has completed specialised training in the course of a single degree course, why would they employ a less highly trained graduate? The American degree course generally lasts four years, the English three and the Bologna-compliant diploma four. This negates those objections which caused the 1998 legislation introducing the bachelor/master system on a trial basis.

The next objection is simply refuted. If, worldwide, the majority of students at first degree level acquire fewer academic and professional skills which are only extended at postgraduate level, then those who, thanks to a better education system, have been able to deepen and consolidate their abilities as undergraduates have an unbeatable advantage on the world stage.

Another formal criticism: the Anglo-Saxon system of degree levels is supposedly irreversible. As a snapshot of the present situation, that may be true. But if until six years ago all European universities showed great diversity and achieved great success, why should the opposite position become 'irreversible' overnight?

The legal objection is the weakest. The Bologna Process is said to be forcing universities to conform to the decisions taken by the European education ministers. In fact, the Process and these decisions are not legally binding. Whilst they were agreed by the education ministers, they are merely recommended by regional administrations. Incidentally, there is a great debate about whether or not a Bologna-compliant diploma could at the same time be contrary to the Bologna principles. Structures and content could be adopted whilst preserving the present system of graduate levels – the Bologna statement does not even mention the terms 'bachelor' and 'master', and the definition of the second level is unambiguous: 'The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.' Postgraduate studies presented in the new format would make up the second level, thus conforming with the Bologna model.

It will not for some time be too late to develop ideas and make comparisons in order to identify which elements of the HE system are successful and which are not. The European Union is stressing more and more the need not only to preserve but also to develop cultural diversity. A Bologna-compliant model conceals no dangers, and should cause no confusion. This concept, guided by the enduring principles that have run through the whole process from the beginning, is characterised by the notion and promotion of competitiveness: the Bologna-compliant diploma is well prepared to meet this challenge.

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