

University and College Union submission to the education and skills select committee inquiry into the Bologna process

Executive summary

1. The Bologna Process is approaching the last phase of its original projected ten year programme and it is timely to look ahead. The unions representing academic and academic staff across Europe were admitted as consultative members of the process in 2005; in the UK, the University and College Union argues that the interests and expertise of staff must be fully engaged in the process at European, national and institutional levels if it is to be given reality. In particular, more must be done to raise the profile and awareness of 'Bologna' at the national and the institutional level. There also needs to be further consideration of how best to protect and develop the range and diversity of the UK's higher education course provision in the context of Bologna. Finally, the evolving implications of the approach reflected in the 'Bologna' approach at the European level for the global higher education and research community need to be considered. We need to ensure that 'Bologna' does not diminish the strong international character and collegiality of the UK and European higher education systems.

The University and College Union (the UCU)

2. UCU represents almost 120,000 academic and academic-related staff across the United Kingdom. It was formed by merger of the Association of University Teachers and NATFHE the university and college lecturers' union on 1 June 2006. The UCU takes a leading role on higher education issues within the teachers' global union federation Education International (EI), and provides one of EI's two consultative representatives on the Bologna Follow-Up Group.

Introduction

3. The University and College Union, representing almost 120,000 academic and academic-related staff across the United Kingdom, welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Commons Education and Skills Committee Inquiry into the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process is generally little understood or discussed in the United Kingdom. In our view, because the UK's higher education system appears broadly to meet the most high profile element of the process, the three phase structure of degree programmes, there has been considerable complacency

about the potential impact of the Process on the higher education system and graduate employment in the United Kingdom.

4. In fact, Bologna has been a remarkable and rapid success, and has achieved in a relatively short time, a remarkable degree of agreement across a European region defined in far wider terms than even the expanded European Union. Further, it is now seen in the global context as a challenge to which other countries and regions need to respond. The London inter-ministerial conference in May 2007, the fifth in the sequence which started with Bologna, will start the movement towards the conclusion of the first phase of the Process. However, it is now clear that there will need to be a successor phase and in London in May, the debate on the shape of this next phase of Bologna will begin, to prepare the ground for the inter-ministerial conference hosted by the Benelux countries in 2009. Therefore the select committee inquiry is timely and important.
5. The University and College Union is a member of the global union federation Education international (EI), and the Pan-European Structure of EI argued forcefully from the start of the Process that the interests of academic staff needed to be directly represented within Bologna, on an equal footing with the university managements and the students, which had been admitted early on to the consultative structures of Bologna. Finally, at the Bergen Inter-ministerial conference in May 2005, EI was admitted as a consultative member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). One of the two EI members of the BFUG is from the UCU. It has quickly become clear that the voice of the teaching and research staff in BFUG is essential in order to establish a rounded picture of the impact of decisions taken in the Process on national systems and individual institutions.

The UK and Bologna: intermediate qualifications

6. The UK qualifications system has a number of idiosyncracies compared with the 'Bachelor, Master, Doctor' model at the core of the Bologna Process. Some of these differences emerged quite sharply at the Bergen Inter-Ministerial conference. The question of HNCs, HNDs, foundation degrees and ordinary degrees has been dealt with so far by a compromise wording contained in the Bergen Communiqué, which allowed for the possibility of intermediate qualifications 'within national contexts'. This would appear to mean that national systems may include such qualifications but that they are not part of the Bologna framework, which is acceptable as long as it does not inhibit their current pattern of use in the UK.
7. This is not the place to discuss the future of intermediate qualifications per se. However, the issue of sub-bachelor courses seems certain to re-open when the government's proposals to allow colleges to award their own foundation degrees, as proposed by the current further education and training bill, are developed. The capacity and the willingness of the Bologna Process to accommodate significant deviations from the core three phase model, or higher education courses which

stand outside it, remain to be tested. UCU believes that these intermediate courses are an important part of the UK's national higher education provision, successfully combining our vocational and higher education traditions. They are particularly important for access and progression, and valued by students and employers alike. Any developments within Bologna must not jeopardise their future.

The qualifications framework

8. The UK needs to have a clear perspective on the way in which the national and European qualifications frameworks articulate with one another but also with the Bologna Process. The much wider geographical scope of Bologna is a source of tension between it and the European Union. There have been robust exchanges in the Follow-Up Group between proponents of the Bologna model and of the EQF, and the two policy strands can generate new loyalties and tensions within national systems generally, and the issue of qualifications frameworks may bring this tension into sharp focus, but it is to be hoped that means can be found of making the different systems compatible. The UK will have a particular interest in this in view of the wide range of its intermediate qualifications and the emphasis placed on them to deliver the government's targets for participation in higher education. Both for the benefit of the UK higher education system and for our European interlocutors, the UK needs to make an evidence-backed case for sub-three year degree qualifications as part of the national system, on the basis of their impact on access to bachelors' degrees and to the labour market.
9. There are a number of other issues which need to be addressed. Ordinary degrees in the Scottish higher education system do not lead to the second cycle, and in that sense the Scottish ordinary degree is also a sub-degree valuable in its own right. Another factor is the high number and wide range of essentially vocational degree programmes at sub-Bachelor, Bachelor and Master level. Similarly, 'Bologna' also means that the current debate on degree classification in the United Kingdom cannot take place in a vacuum. It will need to take trends and proposed changes across the Bologna area into account. Bologna is now a system within which national systems operate, not a 'bolt-on' extra.

Masters degrees

10. The range and diversity of programmes in the UK leading to Masters' degrees, including not only variations in duration from less than one year to two or more, but also whether they are first or second cycle in Bologna terms has also been identified as an issue of difference between UK provision and the more homogeneous patterns being set up under the Bologna rubric. In Scotland the four-year honours degree and Master degrees fits this pattern more easily. Arguably, the Masters' level is an area in which Bologna will have a major impact in the UK, encouraging some positive existing trends. These include moves towards the Masters level being used

as the main route for professional qualification in some fields, or for continuous professional development as well as for more general lifelong learning. We believe it would be unfortunate if the United Kingdom's diversity of provision at this level, including the range of modes of study which reflect the lifestyles and needs of the mature student population, were squeezed out of the system. On the other hand, the requirements of Bologna could be turned to advantage in making both the objectives of study and the routes into study, at this level, more transparent, and also as a guarantor of quality and international recognition.

Life-Long Learning

11. The Bologna Process has made strong commitments to Life-Long Learning, but this is likely to be a concept which varies widely in its application from country to country. In any elaboration of the concept, it is important that any proposals strengthen and build on the range of life long learning programmes and modes of study which have been built up in the UK, and adds new dimensions in terms of mobility and international recognition.

Quality

12. The BFUG appears to be moving towards a pragmatic approach to Quality Assurance, building on existing developments and particularly the work of the ENQA, which registers national agencies, rather than an elaborate reinvention of the wheel which seemed for a time to be a possibility. However the success of the Bologna Process in extending its reach so far so quickly may mean that UK institutions need to work hard within the emerging quality assurance structures to ensure the credentials of partner structures and institutions. Academic staff involved in this work will need to be supported in an increasingly complex task. Consideration may also need to be given to the needs of students if they are to fulfil the expectations on them to be active participants in quality assurance systems, and possibly training offered to students, as in Scotland. Any system adopted by Bologna needs to take account of the maturity of national systems and the potential additional costs and administrative burdens. UCU would argue that the Bologna Process should not place any significant extra quality assurance requirements on UK institutions.

Mobility

13. The mobility of staff and students, both for study and employment, is a key feature of Bologna, but one which the follow-up group has been handicapped by the lack of data. The UCU is working with EI to host a major seminar/conference within the Bologna official programme in London in February, entitled 'Making Bologna a reality', on staff and student mobility, which is aimed at advancing the debate and

providing a platform for the teachers' concerns regarding the Bologna Process. The deficiency in work and policy on staff mobility so far within the Bologna Process, can be directly attributed to the lack of a staff voice.

Bologna and the world

14. The Process is taking increasing interest in the way the Europe of Bologna relates to other regional and national developments elsewhere – what it has so far called the 'external dimension'. Historically the UK HE system has been both part of a European structure and tradition and, equally important, part of the global academic community. The undercurrents of globalisation and commodification of higher education and research, themselves part of the rationale for Bologna, are a challenge to the collegial model of international higher education, based on international cooperation. We see this collegial model as a key characteristic of the university. Therefore we welcome the Bologna emphases on some of the key European commonalities – the public service ethos of universities, institutional autonomy, collegiality within and between institutions, academic freedom, access and quality, even if there is an element within Bologna of recognising their market value as much as an assertion of them as intrinsic values of the university. It is essential that the protection of these characteristics is recognised as important to the goal of creating a European Higher Education and Research Area.

Conclusion

15. Finally, it is important for the UK government to play a leading part in the forthcoming debate on the future of the Bologna Process after the initial phase is completed in 2010. There is still a huge job to be done in making the higher education community itself, and the wider public including in particular the employers, more familiar with the content and the goals of the Bologna Process. Further progress needs to be made to ensure that the current work on issues like quality recognition of qualifications, staff and student mobility, and labour market issues is completed and implemented effectively across the countries of the Bologna Process. There will be a need for a pro-active management of the system if it is to have an impact on the lives of staff and students across the Bologna area. In our view this does not need to be highly bureaucratic, but should draw on the working methods which have distinguished Bologna from other European initiatives.
16. In particular this would mean keeping its core character as an inter-governmental process, while putting the secretariat on a more established footing so that it isn't the present 'caravan' moving from city to city every two years. Arguably, the deepening of the process should be accompanied by a deepening of the expertise and authority of the secretariat. It must also lead to a more transparent system, making staff and students aware of the implications of Bologna in a more concrete way but also raising the awareness of employers – and ensuring that higher

education institutions and policymakers in other global regions are aware of Bologna. A new phase of Bologna also needs to build on on the start which has been made to bring the consultative partners (ie, the institutions, staff, students and other non-national government players) more completely within the process and the talks on what system should carry the process forward after 2010. The UCU and Education International would welcome that.

Recommendations

Key action points to be addressed at the United Kingdom level include:

17. A programme of awareness-raising among UK institutions and academic staff, about the implications of Bologna;
18. Support for increased involvement of academic staff in the professional issues which must be addressed to make Bologna work, including mobility and career progression within a European context;
19. A serious national debate about the implications for the higher education system of the projected expansion of foundation degrees, in the context of Bologna's commitment to life-long learning;
20. Pro-active consideration of the second phase of the Bologna process beyond 2009, and the place of the UK system within the European and the global higher education and research community.

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