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The Bologna Process and the Recognition of Qualifications

Frank McMahon, Dublin Institute of Technology

Introduction

Much of the interest and debate about the Bologna Declaration following its signing has been focused on the award structures which have been introduced. Thus, people talk about “Bologna degrees” when referring to the introduction of three-year degrees in many continental countries, where such degrees did not exist before 1999. However, it is useful to remind ourselves that while the overall thrust of the Bologna Declaration is the creation of the European Higher Education Area by the end of the decade, it also involved six specific objectives as follows:

Objective 1

Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system.

Objective 2

Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and postgraduate. Access to the second cycles shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycles should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.

Objective 3

Establishment of a system of credits – such as in the European Credit Transfer System – as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognised by the receiving institutions concerned.

Objective 4

Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement with particular attention to:

- For students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services
- For teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and valorisation of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training without prejudice to their statutory rights.

Objective 5

Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance, with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies. Quality is seen as the basic underlying condition for trust, relevance, mobility, comparability and attractiveness in the European Higher Education Area.

Objective 6

Promotion of the necessary European dimension in higher education, particularly with regard to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

Subsequently, the communiqué that followed the Prague conference in 2001 added objectives in regard to Lifelong Learning, the Role of Students and the Promotion and Attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area, thus giving nine objectives.

Impact of Objectives

While higher education institutions and professional bodies in Ireland, with considerable support from the DES, are embracing the thrust of the Bologna Declaration and engaging in meaningful discussions in this regard this is not the case in other countries. In the UK, for example, there appears to be little engagement with the objectives among higher education institutions or at governmental level. When analysed, many of these objectives include sub-objectives that will assist the wider recognition of qualifications

Impact of Objective 1

Objective 1 includes the implementation of the Diploma Supplement. This will provide a standard format for the description of student achievements on courses throughout Europe. It is hoped that its standardisation will facilitate its recognition by employers and the wider society, thus increasing the recognition of qualifications that have hitherto been obscure. The Irish Department of Education & Science is working actively to support the implementation of the Bologna Declaration and has established a national steering group with nominees of CHIU, the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, HEA, HETAC and NQAI. The Department has also established a separate working group on the implementation of the diploma supplement. It is planned that some institutions will

implement pilot projects during this academic year while it will become widespread in 2004/05.

Impact of Objective 2

Objective 2 seeks the adoption of a system based on two cycles, undergraduate and postgraduate, with the first cycle lasting a minimum of three years. This aspect has caught the imagination more than any other. It has led to real and substantial change in many countries, especially those Central European countries that traditionally had five-year degree programmes and have now introduced three-year degrees. The development of a framework of qualifications by the NQAI has been influenced by Bologna and the framework recognises the appropriateness of a degree qualification at the end of three years of full-time study. In seeking to implement the new framework, DIT will replace its three year diploma programmes with three year ordinary degrees that comply with the learning outcomes for Level 7 awards.

The new Framework will include awards made by academic institutions and also awards of professional bodies. Thus awards of professional bodies may enjoy greater visibility and public recognition through their inclusion in the framework. It is envisaged there will be two routes to inclusion in the framework for awards of professional bodies:

(a) By direct application to NQAI and an evaluation by NQAI (method to be determined) of the application

or

(b) By negotiation with an awarding body (a university, DIT or HETAC) and the inclusion of the award via that awarding body.

The latter route may well encourage greater interaction between higher education institutions and professional bodies, as well as wider recognition of the qualifications of professional bodies.

On a wider scale there are discussions to explore the feasibility of a European Framework of Qualifications, though this seems to still be some distance away.

Impact of Objective 3

The establishment of a system of credits is vital to facilitate student mobility. The most commonly used system is the ECTS which is used by most Irish HEIs and many continental European countries but not by the UK.

The NQAI has established an advisory group on credits on which CHIU, HEA, DIT and HETAC are represented. There is a separate group working in the further education area. It is hoped the work of these groups will lead to a national approach to credits thus facilitating the implementation of the access transfer and progression provision of the Qualifications (Edu & Training) Act, 1999. Objective 3 also envisages the recognition of credits acquired in non-higher educational contexts and if this spirit prevails, the recognition of qualifications will be enhanced.

Impact of Objective 4

Objective 4 directly addresses the need for recognition of periods spent in another European country by teachers, students, researchers and administrative staff. The EU has funded programmes to encourage mobility within the union (including Erasmus and Socrates programmes) and programmes geared towards former communist bloc countries (Tempus and Tacis programmes) and many Continental and Irish students have benefited from these. The National Report on the Implementation of the Bologna Process, being presented by the Department of Education and Science to the Ministers for Education meeting in Berlin this month to review the Bologna process, indicates that Ireland's participation in student mobility (Erasmus) has been above the EU average (1.06% for Ireland as against 0.78% EU average). However, the imbalance between incoming and outgoing students persists; in 2001/02 we welcomed 3,231 students to Ireland but only 1,708 went abroad.

Impact of Objective 5

Objective 5 urges European Co-operation in Quality Assurance and thus does not directly impact upon recognition of qualifications. However, the adoption of similar approaches both nationally and internationally to quality assurance may well assist mutual understanding which in turn will facilitate recognition.

Impact of Objective 6

Objective 6 seeks the promotion of a European dimension in higher education through curriculum development, inter-institute co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study. One aspect of the latter is the development of joint programmes, especially Masters degrees. My own institution has participated in some of these joint programmes and a feature of them is the opportunity for students to take modules in more than one country.

Impact of Objective 7

Objective 7 on lifelong learning has the potential to boost APEL and thereby give recognition to courses and qualifications taken by learners. This process may well facilitate the recognition of qualifications which were hitherto accorded little recognition, either nationally or internationally.

EU Initiatives for Mutual Recognition

As well as Bologna Process, there is a parallel process of encouraging mutual recognition of awards within the EU. Initiatives for this purpose are not strictly part of the Bologna Process and thus fall outside the scope of this paper.

The principle of a free market becomes more of a reality when workers can practise their professions/trades throughout the EU. I described this as a parallel process because Bologna is not just about the EU; it includes the EU states plus as many other European states which are not current members.

Conclusion

The Bologna Process has the capacity to enhance a much wider recognition of qualifications both domestic and international as progress is made towards the achievement of the many objectives of the process. The Ministers for Education have shown a desire to broaden both the extent and scope of the process. For example, the review meeting in Prague in 2001 resulted in some additional objectives and in the acceptance of more countries into the process. It is likely that additional countries will be accepted into membership this month in Berlin and the objectives may be further refined or extended. Of particular interest to universities and other institutions of higher education is the extent to which the process remains a voluntary one. The very moderate language of the Bologna Declaration, with its emphasis on the autonomy of universities, may be gradually replaced by firmer objectives which are tied to funding initiatives.