Bologna: fake or promise?
by Ulrich Littmann

It is a strange phenomenon. Everybody in higher education knows that what is commonly referred to as the ‘Bologna process’ (knowing and not being able to stop it) and yet it is viewed with increasing enthusiasm, grave concerns, high hopes, serious doubts, etc. Someone with professional and/or academic roots in Europe and in transatlantic academic relations cannot help but notice that current discussions have not only a European dimension. There is an American dimension as well.

The emergence of a united Europe, the end of the Cold War, and changes around the world during the 1990s were significant and also for developments in the cooperation and competition among universities and in the lives of those who cross borders to attend to that.

When higher education in the socialist bloc had broken away as an Eastern alternative, the so-called Western systems, the US institutions, etc., were set on a journey of new routes towards educational goals that should fit the needs of the new world order and, at the same time, meet regional and national interests. The variety of routes is the reason for hopes and concerns, for contradictions and misunderstandings, and for too many questions and too many answers - some of which are addressed in the following paragraphs.

### Basic differences

As far as higher learning is concerned, Europe and the US had much in common and yet there are basic differences. The European authorities in Brussels had integrated training and education into the issues of labour and a common labour market. European academe and its national sponsors, the governments, parliaments, remembered the potential and the sunk costs of an educational system that was in the making and that was referred to as the ‘Bologna process’. Someone with professional and/or academic roots in Europe and the US had much in common.

Alternatives, the so-called Western systems, showed the way, the US institutions, etc., were set on a journey of new routes towards educational goals that should fit the needs of the new world order and, at the same time, meet regional and national interests. The variety of routes is the reason for hopes and concerns, for contradictions and misunderstandings, and for too many questions and too many answers - some of which are addressed in the following paragraphs.

### American model

The four basic principles of the Bologna Declaration (fixity, readability and comparable degrees; two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate level, and graduate level and system of credits - ECTS; quality assurance had clearly been adopted from the American models) - but there is reason to assume that the advocates either did not understand the US system or intended to convey the impression that characteristic procedural rules could be implanted into Europe with a similar effect as being among the best American universities. To the outside observer, the fact that the Americans referred to their model’s transatlantic academic community. Third-year European bachelor programmes will produce exchanges of an academic year which in the past have been regarded as the ideal period for ‘educational’ as well as ‘academic student exchanges’.

### Standards

In intellectual circles, the United States appeared to have set standards in academic degree programs. But by disregarding the bottom two-thirds of American higher education institutions (the so-called ‘good’ portion of US higher education) and transformed into a giant service industry, most notably for-profit. As it turned out, it was exceedingly successful in operating at home, in attracting scholars from abroad, and in recruiting large numbers of students from all over the world whose financial investments in higher education were even reported in US commercial statistics.

### The Bologna process

The Bologna process is one of many considerable actions which today affect - as well as haunt - encourage and/or hearten - higher education, its institutions, sponsors, users, and spokespersons around the world. Re-reading the article by James Frey (IEAE Forum, vol 5, no 3, winter 2003) on the role and function of higher education in the 21st century fails to understand the ensuing confusion. It is difficult to identify the European personalities or the offices or the interest groups that worked on the issues and formulated the Bologna Declaration and subsequent papers, and voiced approval or support or dissent in the media or in national as well as regional conferences ever since.

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### Language

English as the means of communication appears to promote internationalisation because it is spoken and/or understood everywhere, and therefore it is also assumed to be democratic. It offers the linguistic tools to implement the Bologna process which had everything Europe had been looking for and European scholars had been experiencing. Thus Europeans tended to view Anglo-American higher education institutions as having an internationally viable model of new forms of university learning, but also as a competitor - perhaps successfully by commercialising higher education - on the worldwide market of education.

Yet, at the same time, Brussels entered into agreements with the US on cooperation and academic exchanges.

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