The impact of the Bologna process in France

by Chantal Barry

The Bologna process is to concentrate on a couple of aspects of the Bologna process in France in the space provided. What I will do therefore is to concentrate on a couple of aspects of particular significance and complexity in France: the introduction of the Master’s degree in the universities and the relevant differences between the universities and the Écoles des Grandes Écoles (EGs).

Structure of French higher education

However, before looking at that perhaps a quick reminder of the structure of French HE itself. Broadly speaking, the system is characterised by a division between the universities on the one hand and the EGs on the other. One of the essential differences between the two types of institution is that the universities must conform to national decrees and directives on education as defined by the French Ministry of Education, whereas the EGs have a much greater degree of autonomy over their curricula and programmes, even if many of them are governed by other ministries or indeed professional bodies.

In essence, this means that the Ministry of Education is free to set the Bologna agenda for the universities in France whereas the EGs are pretty much free to adopt its principles or not as they see fit. Another important feature of the universities is that, traditionally, entrance to degree programmes only becomes selective at third-cycle level. We shall see that these realities are reflected in the way in which the process has been integrated into French higher education.

To start with the universities, in the pre-Bologna period the classic pathway was:

• First cycle: a short cycle of two years leading to the first degree, the DEUG/DEUST
• Second cycle: a third year leading to the Licence (Bachelier’s), a fourth year leading to the Maîtrise
• Third cycle: DEA (academic graduate degree) or DESS (professionally oriented graduate degree)
• Doctorate

Bologna implementation

In 2002, under the instructions of the Ministry of Education, the universities began implementing the aims of the Bologna process, each according to their own schedule and timetable. Given the complexity of the system as described above (and this is a simplified version), it would probably be safe to say that the setting up of the 3-5-8, or LMD as the cycles are called in France, was and is the most complex of the Bologna aims to realise. Given that the system has changed from 2+1+1+1 to 3+2 in a very short period of time one can readily imagine the enormous consequences this has had and will have on the intellectual and academic content of the different degree programmes. Today, this is probably the area where most work remains to be done. It is therefore no small credit to the university system as they knew it, decided to protest by going on strike. One of the things which most concerned them was the fact that, as the Maîtrise or fourth year of study had been part of the second cycle before Bologna, students could enter the fourth year of studies on a non-competitive basis once they had successfully completed the Licence. Now, with the new structure in place, selectivity would become the order of the day directly after the Licence (Bachelier). This, of course, entailed a radical change of mind-set for students in a country which has a long tradition of public service, with free access to education in a non-competitive environment being a central part of that tradition. Students were not happy either about the disappearance of the first cycle DEUG/DEUST.

And finally, they were also concerned that ECTS would encourage what they saw as unhealthy competition between the universities as the credit system would allow them to move freely from one university to another ‘shopping’ for their degree and obliging the universities to compete for students. In order to allay the fears of the student population, it was decided that the simplest thing to do was to introduce the new structure alongside the old one rather than as a substitute to it. In essence, this means that the universities have managed to put the Bologna structure in place while reassuring students that older, national options are still available to them. Simple? Not really! Creative? Most certainly. I would imagine that over the next few years, this will gradually fall away as the old degrees become naturally less attractive to a student population desirous of recognition within a European system. So who said you can’t keep all of the people happy all of the time?

Student concerns

In October/November of 2003 the student body, not happy to learn of the disappearance of the degrees that characterised the university system as they knew it, decided to protest by going on strike. One of the things which most concerned them was the fact that, as the Maîtrise or fourth year of study had been part of the second cycle before Bologna, students could enter the fourth year of studies on a non-competitive basis once they had successfully completed the Licence. Now, with the new structure in place, selectivity would become the order of the day directly after the Licence (Bachelier). This, of course, entailed a radical change of mind-set for students in a country which has a long tradition of public service, with free access to education in a non-competitive environment being a central part of that tradition. Students were not happy either about the disappearance of the first cycle DEUG/DEUST.

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EGs

With regard to the EGs the situation is at the same time simpler and more complex. It is simpler in the sense that these schools have a greater deal of autonomy over their curricula and programmes. Most of them function independently of the Ministry of Education, though many of them are regulated by the professions in engineering, business, etc. Their independence from the Ministry means that they are free to implement whatever measures they wish to as they see fit. In this way, many of the measures contained in the Bologna process such as ECTS, quality assurance, mobility, etc., have already been in place for a number of years and in some cases as far back as 1999. A large majority of these schools have also organised their academic year in semesters thus facilitating mobility both in and out. However, the situation is more complex for the EGs, in that very few (if any) of them have adopted the ‘L’part of the LMD, i.e. they do not deliver a Bachelor’s degree. This is because entrance to these schools is highly selective and candidates to the schools typically spend one to two years in special schools preparing for the entrance exams. They therefore enter the schools having completed two years post-secondary but without having specialised in the chosen fields which would make it impossible for the EGs to grant them a Bachelor’s degree the following year.

Paradoxically, a student who fails to enter a GE (and this is not a rarity given the small numbers accepted) can enter university at third-year level, having gained credit for the two years spent at prepa school studying for the competitive entrance exam of the chosen GE. In the case of other schools like Sciences Po, students who enter at undergraduate level either do one year’s preparation outside the school or enter it directly after finishing secondary school but in either case they receive their first degree after five years bringing them up to Master’s level. In essence, this means that the GE’s deliver Master’s degrees to students who have completed five years of study, in keeping with the principles of Bologna. However, these students do not receive an undergraduate degree which is in contradiction with Bologna. It is worth mentioning that within France this is not seen as being problematic. The jury is still out on how the changes will decide on this in the future but if they do decide to deliver an undergraduate degree this will entail vast changes not only in their own structures and way of thinking but also throughout French post-secondary education starting...
The missing link

by Lars Fransson

The current Bologna process is expected to transform the diverse higher education scene in Europe into a more similar format.

Considerable progress has also been made in a number of areas. One serious obstacle, however, to smooth student exchange, especially on a semester basis, is the difference in the academic year in different European countries.

Major weakness

This variety can hardly be a part of the much-heralded richness inherent in the diversity within Europe. The different starting and finishing dates of the academic year and of semesters at universities across Europe have been a longstanding problem and still create a serious obstacle for planning where and when to take courses generally and in particular in joint programmes. This remains to be viewed as one of the major weaknesses in Europe today, and one which seems to be neglected by every official actor, including in the Bologna process. As we know, universities in most German-speaking countries display the largest deviation from most other countries (or vice versa). Not least in the planning of European Master Courses in the ERASMUS Mundus programme do the current differences in the academic years pose serious problems.

Adjust the academic year

In my opinion, it should be possible to adjust the academic year in such a way that a maximum of one month’s difference in the starting and finishing dates would be aimed for as a future goal. Such a limited goal would not pose insurmountable obstacles in any country. When talking to colleagues and politicians, they usually, after some deliberation, agree that this issue should be tackled. The problem seems to be that no-one feels that they ‘own’ the issue. Also, many state that it is impossible to change since the semester systems have such a long traditional and are almost inborn in the citizens. In addition, the climate is used as an excuse not to change. However, the climate in different European countries is not so different as many want to believe.

Bergen

Any support locally in your countries for this issue to be put on the agenda for the Bergen Ministerial Meeting in May this year, or at any forum involved in the Bologna process nationally, regionally or internationally, would be highly appreciated. So would comments on this article.

Lars Fransson is Director of the International Office at Uppsala University

Box 256, 751 05 Uppsala, Sweden, tel +46-184 71 18 62, e-mail lars.fransson@uadm.uu.se

Chantal Barry is International Relations Manager at Sciences Po Paris, and a member of the EAIE’s Executive Board and Steering Committee

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