

Position Paper by Universities Austria

On the Future of the Bologna Process

5 March 2018

2018 marks the twentieth anniversary of the *Sorbonne Declaration* (25 May 1998), which constituted a major step towards bringing about the Bologna reform. 2019 will be the anniversary year of the *Bologna Declaration* (19 June 1999). These anniversaries, as well as debates at European level on the future of the Bologna Process as such, have inspired Universities Austria to present its fundamental positions on the future of the Bologna Process.

1. Added value of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

The European Higher Education Area strives to facilitate, and ensure appreciation for, staff and student mobility within the European countries taking part in the Bologna Process. Another aim is to promote the recognition of all national higher education qualifications and to implement equivalence in standards in a bid to foster employability both within and outside higher education.

Introducing a comparable three tier system for study programmes, comparable higher education degrees and a uniform diploma supplement including a transcript of records, the European Higher Education Area has become a tangible reality for students while also providing positive incentives at various levels for universities to engage in quality development. The paradigm shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach, the introduction of the ECTS¹ for all educational units offered as well as other learning offers made available within the framework of a given curriculum led to key findings about student workloads and feasibility of the relevant study programmes. These findings have proved to be pivotal in providing new ideas for curricula designed based on qualification profiles and learning outcomes as well as for higher education development in general. Programmes like Erasmus played a major role in fostering student mobility or enabling such mobility in the first place. Learning agreements facilitate the recognition of academic performance. Austria has opted to provide additional legal certainty for students by making a recognition certificate available in advance.

Given these aspects alone, it is obvious that the Bologna reform has become a fundamental framework for the European Higher Education Area within which both the curricula and the higher education institutions can and will evolve further.

¹ European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.

2. Challenges in shaping the Bologna Process at the European level

It has to be admitted, however, that the Bologna reform has been faced with challenges right from the outset. One major problem in this respect is that the universities are not involved as much as they should be. While the European University Association (EUA) has, time and again, called for feedback loops and a stronger involvement of universities in the process, the really important debates took place primarily among a select group of government representatives. This is true for both the European BFUG and its Working Groups, and the process used for arriving at the communiqués.

For this reason, debates on special topics and fields relating to university or higher education policy do not sufficiently draw on the experience of universities and the expertise of university representatives. The current lack of expert input manifests itself at least at two levels:

- the European level, where hardly any university representatives are assigned to the BFUG and the working groups, and
- the national level, where, when it comes to communicating national focal points, current issues and problems, the higher education institutions are in most instances not able to contribute their views on issues and key papers as much as they would like and where criticisms expressed by them are not passed on accordingly.

3. Implementation of the key Bologna goals in Austria

The following section is dedicated to the key goals of the Bologna reform in the higher education sector in Austria. Between 1999 – the year the *Bologna Declaration* was signed – and 2018, Austrian universities witnessed rapid growth. While 227,302 regular students at public universities were recorded in the winter semester of 1999², this number had already risen to 308,374 by the winter semester of 2016.³

What is more, as well as carrying out a large-scale organisational reform, the universities also implemented, within the scope of the Bologna Process, in-depth reforms in the legal rules governing university studies, as follows:

3.1. Implementation of the three-cycle structure for study programmes

As opposed to the three-cycle structure commonly found today, implementation of which was completed in most fields already a while ago, not a single bachelor programme had been

² Written request to the statistics department of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research: evaluated by Harald Titz, 17 January 2018.

³ Unidata, Studierende an Universitäten WS 2016 (16.1.2018) [Students at universities winter semester 2016 (16/01/2018)].

available in 1999. It was the winter semester of 2000 that saw the introduction of the first two bachelor programmes.⁴ After a reluctant start, more and more programmes have been implemented over the years. The following statistics provide a comparison with respect to enrolment in regular study programmes, by type of programme: While in the winter semester of 1999 students could enrol only in diploma programmes (260,263) and doctoral programmes (24,531), four types of programmes were being offered in the winter semester of 2016: diploma programmes (64,818 students), bachelor programmes (187,398), master programmes (60,074) and doctoral programmes (25,494).⁵

3.2. Easy-to-understand and comparable academic degrees

The purpose of introducing the three-cycle structure in the countries participating in the Bologna reform, Austria among them, is to make academic degrees easy to understand and comparable. Such shared understanding and the application of a European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – ECTS are intended to make credit transfers easier and help measure student workloads. Workloads should be reasonably comparable in every country, at all universities and in all fields of study, with one ECTS credit being equivalent to between 25 and 30 hours of work.

Austrian universities have been using the ECTS already since the initial introduction of bachelor and master programmes. With the new study structure the diploma supplement (including a transcript of records) was introduced, which all universities issue in an effort to provide a structured view of individual student progress, thus contributing to making data comparable on an international scale.

3.3. International mobility

The past twenty years have seen a change in student mobility, not least because of publicly funded mobility programmes. A basic distinction can be drawn between vertical and horizontal mobility. Vertical mobility means that whole educational programmes are completed at different universities, while horizontal mobility implies that mobility takes place within a given programme, for instance under Erasmus, in the form of an internship, a research visit, summer or winter school, field trips, expert conferences or artistic projects. Recording all of these different forms of mobility is quite challenging, as many of these activities are organised by the students themselves and are therefore frequently not subject to systematic registration. Here are the figures available in this context:

- According to the most recent OECD report, which provides data for 2015, 15.9 % of students or 68,000 persons enrolled in tertiary education in Austria were international students.⁶
- With respect to horizontal tertiary-sector mobility under a publicly funded mobility programme (Erasmus), the number of students having completed a stay abroad has risen

⁴ Sinology at Vienna University; biology at Salzburg University.

⁵ Written request to the statistics department of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research: evaluated by Harald Titz, 17 January 2018.

The data include only regular study programmes by type of programme (excluding secondary programmes; in cases where it is compulsory to combine study programmes, only the first was included). The survey did not cover which bachelor, master and doctoral programmes existed.

⁶ OECD: Education at a Glance 2017. OECD Indicators (Paris 2017), p. 300.

over the years. While 2,994 Austrian students went abroad in the winter semester of 2001, their number had grown to 4,032 by the winter semester of 2016. However, an analysis of how these figures compare to the total number of students enrolled at the same time underlines that growth measured in percentage terms, which had amounted to up to 1.7% until the winter semester of 2004 (3,326 of a total of 210,080 students), then flattened out and only slowly recovered again to reach 1.4% in the winter semester of 2016 (4,032 of a total of 308,374 students).

- Horizontal mobility statistics also need to take into account students coming to Austria within the framework of mobility programmes, so-called incoming students. Their number has been continually on the rise, having more than doubled from the 3,698 recorded in the winter semester of 2001. For a long time, the numbers remained within a range between 7,000 and almost 8,500 (winter semester 2007 – winter semester 2015). The preliminary data for 2016 indicate 4,384 students.⁷

3.4. European dimension

The introduction of the three-cycle system in the countries participating in the Bologna reform has contributed significantly to the development of what is called a *European dimension*.

Ensuring both student mobility and recognition of degrees in the participating countries, the joint degree or double degree programmes set up together with other international universities also add to the European dimension. However, given the considerable administrative effort involved in developing joint degree or double degree programmes, some universities are more in favour of mutual recognition and decline to develop such programmes.

Moreover, Austrian universities are strongly involved in international research projects and secure large amounts of funding under European Research Council projects.

3.5. Quality assurance

Austria played an active role in the establishment of a European quality assurance structure, with assistance from Universities Austria and its representatives, and helped set up an Austrian quality assurance agency in 2004. The second decade of the 21st century then witnessed a consolidation of the national framework for quality assurance, triggered by the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (*Hochschul-Qualitätssicherungsgesetz* [HS-QSG]), and the establishment of AQ Austria. The agency has already passed an ENQA review and has been added to the European EQAR register. The universities, in turn, set up or enlarged their quality assurance and enhancement departments, with the relevant experts forming a network in 2007.

3.6. Reform of doctoral programmes

Since 2004, Universities Austria and its members have participated in the activities of numerous bodies, both in Austria and internationally, in a bid to improve conditions for doctoral programmes. In January 2005, Universities Austria and the Ministry of Science published a

⁷ Unidata, Studierendenmobilität an Universitäten, Incoming Zeitreihe (16.1.2018) [Unidata, Student mobility at universities, incoming times series (16/01/2018)].

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position paper on doctoral studies⁸ that was to provide a key impetus for further developments at university level. In 2007, Universities Austria for the first time published recommendations on doctoral programmes.

The keystones of these recommendations include raising the minimum duration of such programmes from two to three or four years, providing for improved structuring of doctoral programmes, which in no way implies strict regimentation, and demanding better access regulations for doctoral programmes.

In 2015, these recommendations by Universities Austria were revised and restated based on the developments having taken place at European level. New elements added to the position paper include artistic doctorates, doctoral candidates as early stage researchers, as well as quality assurance structures.⁹

4. Recommendations for the future of the Bologna Process

Given the developments having taken place in Austria over the past twenty years, it is well justified to consider the Bologna reform a success achieved by Austria's universities. With a view to current political developments in some EHEA countries and amid concern about the rise of radicalism and populism throughout Europe, it seems all the more important to continue to support a lively and integrative process in which all countries participate.¹⁰ This is why Universities Austria explicitly favours a reorientation and rearrangement of this process. Against the backdrop of sustainable and integrative growth in Europe, the following applies with respect to a reform of the Bologna Process:

After 20 years of experience with the Bologna reform and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) the universities should step up their efforts to own this reform again. Even if international and structural reconciliation within the EHEA requires an overarching political level for coordination purposes, higher education institutions should not accept being pushed into a merely passive and reactive role.

⁸ Österreichische Rektorenkonferenz und Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur, Das Doktoratsstudium in Österreich. Nationale Positionierung im Kontext europäischer Entwicklungen (Wien, Jänner 2005).

⁹ Österreichische Universitätenkonferenz (Hrsg.), Positionspapier der Österreichischen Universitätenkonferenz zum Doktorat (Wien 2015) [Universities Austria (editor), Position paper on doctoral studies (Vienna 2015)]

¹⁰ The *Bologna Declaration* (1999) already highlighted the role and importance of education with a view to democracy: "The importance of education and educational co-operation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is universally acknowledged as paramount, the more so in view of the situation in South East Europe" (p. 1). This commitment was renewed in 2010 in the Budapest-Vienna Declaration: "We, the Ministers, recommit to academic freedom as well as autonomy and accountability of higher education institutions as principles of the European Higher Education Area and underline the role the higher education institutions play in fostering peaceful democratic societies and strengthening social cohesion" (p. 2).

At the national level, OeAD, the Austrian exchange service, lists the following key goals for the European Higher Education Area: "preservation of the democracy policy aspects regarding freedom of science and teaching, the student-centred approach and in the dealing with students as well as academia from crisis areas." See: <https://oead.at/en/expertise/european-higher-education-area/> (retrieved 5 March 2018).

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Consolidating the EHEA by implementing the agreed reforms appears to be a desirable aim, but existing structures must not be weakened by a continuous widening of the range of topics being addressed. On the contrary, a stronger focus should be placed on a few crucial issues, and implementation in this context should be continually improved through evaluation and supportive measures.

Ministerial communiqués in their current form should be abandoned, a step that would also markedly reduce the proliferation of (sub) working groups and framework papers deriving from them. Instead, a monitoring report should be drawn up every five years to present the status (and the current development) of the European higher education systems and to serve as the basis for informed debate at a political-level strategy meeting.

The political stakeholders should help the universities develop relevant topics and projects, for instance by fostering 'idea labs' that are close to university practice and can provide input in a scientific as well as creative and innovative form. Unlike the existing administrative working groups, which are too complex, such 'idea labs' should preferably rely on lean and responsive types of organisation, with a well-balanced participation of political/ministerial, business and societal stakeholders.

4.1 Recommendations for future focus points

One goal - different solutions: As all universities have different requirements, depending on location, courses offered and size of student body, it is crucial that universities take on more responsibility for how they themselves address and implement EHEA topics than in the past. What will be needed in the future are more independent, flexible and customised solutions in a bid to adequately meet the challenges that present themselves. The approach relied upon in the past, i.e. to hold ministerial conferences every two to three years in order to set targets, is not really deemed expedient for this specific purpose and should therefore be replaced by strategy meetings convened every five years (see 4 above).

Three-cycle system: The three-cycle system for study programmes has already become well established in Austria, but certain processes, such as orientation towards learning outcomes, feasibility and mobility windows, need to be further developed and improved by the universities on an ongoing basis. It also appears necessary for the European labour market to take better account of the three-cycle degrees, especially bachelor degrees. In this context, the business sector would be particularly called upon to better explain the employability aspects of shorter first study cycles to its members and promote the respective degrees, not least because it was the business sector that demanded that shorter first study cycles should be introduced.

Mobility: There is an urgent need to further reduce barriers to mobility and for a generous practice in degree recognition to take hold. An important aspect of degree mobility would be to facilitate the transfer from one study cycle in one EHEA country to the next cycle in another

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EHEA country. However, the focus should not be solely on vertical mobility or semester-based mobility; the reality of tertiary studies calls for more support of short-term mobility. And this kind of mobility should likewise be recorded and counted towards credits.

Financial arrangements and alien-status legal regulations should urgently be revised with respect to degree mobility.

In particular, red tape should be reduced and curricula should be made more flexible to better accommodate student mobility. Easier cooperation, such as between universities on joint programmes, would be highly welcome.

Focus on skills and digitalisation: With a view to fostering employability, it is a sine qua non to focus on student skills, both within and outside their specific fields of study. Fostering digital skills will become more and more important, not only for future employability, but also in terms of being able to participate in science and society.

Social dimension: The national strategy on the social dimension developed in Austria, which also includes the requirements defined by the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015, are in the process of being implemented. In this area, too, more time and resources will be needed to implement, evaluate and continually improve the measures already introduced or developed.