



## The Bologna Process

***The Bologna Process provides the general framework for the reform of European higher education in 47 countries. Its objective is to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010.***

***The Bologna Process particularly aims at improving the compatibility and comparability of higher education systems. Its purpose is also to increase learners' mobility and universities' attractiveness.***

***The Bologna Process has led to profound changes: degree structures have evolved, Diploma Supplements are issued more frequently, Qualification Frameworks have been produced and Quality Assurance Systems have been set up.***

***However, in 2010, not all the Bologna objectives have been reached. Moreover, the speed of implementation differs across countries.***

***The new Bologna priorities for 2020 aim at fully implementing the Bologna objectives and tackling the new challenges facing universities in the next decade.***



Image copyright: Matthew Benoit, 2011.  
Used under license from Shutterstock.com

*The Bologna Process aims at establishing a European Higher Education Area by 2010.*

In this briefing:

- Context
- Main developments
- Achievements and problems
- EU contribution
- Main stakeholders' views
- Perspectives: Bologna beyond 2010
- Main references

### Context

Today, there are [4 000 universities](#)<sup>1</sup> and over 17 million students in the EU.

Member States (MS) are responsible for the organisation and content of education systems (Art.165 TFEU). The EU has a complementary competence (Art. 6 TFEU). It may support MS actions, but not harmonise national legislations. Measures are adopted under the ordinary legislative procedure.

The EU [Higher Education Modernisation Agenda](#)<sup>2</sup> and the new strategy [Europe 2020](#) promote higher education-related actions.

As regards the Bologna Process, it takes place *outside the institutional EU framework*.

The OECD considers that this Process is "the most encompassing and profound set of reforms of European higher education ever".

2010 is the target date for the Bologna reforms. Its achievements can now be assessed.

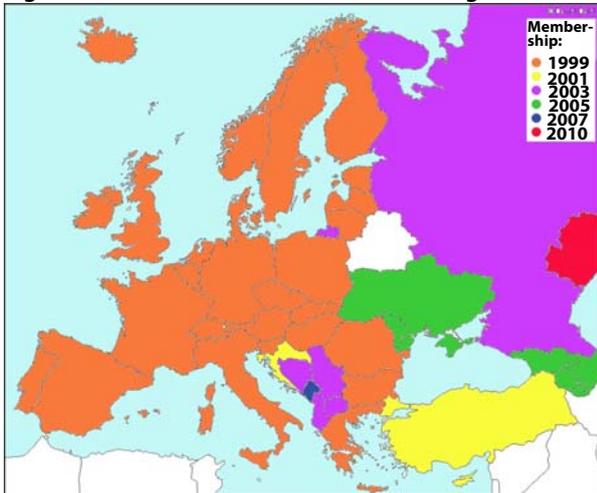
Moreover, the Bologna priorities for the next decade have just been defined.

## Main developments

The Bologna Process aims at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 through policy coordination. In an EHEA, students can enjoy much greater mobility thanks to the recognition of their qualifications.

Today, it involves 47 countries<sup>3</sup> plus the European Commission. Moreover, the Council of Europe, [UNESCO-CEPES](#) and six NGOs<sup>4</sup> are consultative members.

**Figure 1: The Member countries of the Bologna Process.**



Outline map from [Académie d'Aix-Marseille](#).

Bologna is an intergovernmental process. It is not based on an intergovernmental Treaty. Ministers adopt non-legally binding Declarations. Therefore, progress highly depends on the will of governments and universities to implement the Bologna principles<sup>5</sup>.

The [Declaration](#) signed by ministers in charge of higher education in Bologna (1999) gave its name to the Process. It fixed six objectives to be reached within the first decade of the third millennium:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees.
- Adoption of a system based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate.

- Establishment of a system of credits, to promote student mobility.
- Removal of obstacles to the free movement of administrative staff, students, teachers and researchers.
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance.
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

While co-ordinating their policies, countries should respect the diversity of cultures and national education systems.

In Prague (2001), Ministers [stated](#) that lifelong learning should be recognised as an essential element of the EHEA. Moreover, ministers emphasised that the involvement of universities and of students in the Process was needed. They also stressed that the attractiveness of European higher education to European and international students should be enhanced.

In Berlin (2003), the doctoral level was included as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. Ministers also [agreed that](#) closer links between the EHEA and the European Research Area should be developed.

In Bergen (2005), Ministers [stressed](#) that the social dimension was a constituent part of the EHEA.

In London (2007), Ministers [adopted](#) a strategy on the EHEA in a global setting. In 2009, a [Bologna Policy Forum](#) was organised for the first time with non-Bologna countries (e.g. Canada and China), to facilitate global dialogue on higher education issues.

## Achievements and problems

### Degree structures

Today, the three-cycle structure is fully in place or extensively introduced in all countries.

At the level of universities, as of 2010, 95% had this structure in place.

Nevertheless, in nearly all countries, certain fields of study (e.g. medicine) have not embraced the three-cycle structure.

Regarding the first and second cycles (Bachelor and Master), in 2010 the "3+2 years" model is the most common one. It prevails in 19 countries. The "4+2" (dominant in 6 countries) and the "4+1 or 1.5" (4 countries) models are also used. In the other countries, no unique dominant model can be identified. No ministerial Declaration prescribes precisely the length of these cycles.

Concerning the third cycle (doctoral level), developments are still in their early stages. It is difficult to identify dominant national patterns.

Divergences in national implementations can reduce the compatibility of universities' programmes.

### **Diploma supplement (DS)**

The DS is a document explaining the meaning of the qualification achieved by the student (e.g. level and content). Its aim is to increase transparency and to facilitate the mobility of graduates and students. The Bologna Process integrated the DS, which was created before 1999.

The Berlin Declaration stated that DS should be issued automatically and free of charge for all students by 2005.

The use of DS is growing. As of 2010, DS are issued automatically and free of charge in most higher education institutions in 30 out of 46 countries.

However, technical difficulties exist, linked to students' records. Moreover, awareness regarding DS among employers and the general public remains low. Employers either do not use the DS, or else use it only for workers recruited just after graduation.

### **European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)**

ECTS was created in the 1980s to foster student mobility in the framework of the Erasmus programme. It has been part of the Bologna Process since 1999. Today, ECTS or a compatible system is in use in all countries. However, only in 24 countries is ECTS used in more than 75% of universities.

Incorrect use of ECTS is still common. This situation has negative impacts on the development of flexible learning paths. It makes mobility more difficult. Furthermore, in certain cases, credits are still not linked to student workload or learning outcomes<sup>6</sup>.

### **Qualifications frameworks (QF)**

QF describe the qualifications available in universities' cycles. In Bergen, Ministers adopted a Framework for Qualifications in the EHEA<sup>7</sup>. Countries agreed to develop national QF (NQF) within this framework.

Results appear mixed. NQF are in place in only eight countries. Eleven more are well advanced in the process. The 2010 deadline seems to have been too ambitious. The complexity of NQF development has been underestimated. Moreover, students' involvement is still too limited.

### **Quality assurance**

One of the most significant changes brought by the Bologna Process is the development of external quality assurance systems. [European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education](#) (ESG) were adopted in Bergen.

A [European Quality Assurance Register](#) now provides a list of agencies that comply with the ESG. These agencies assess the quality of higher education (external quality assessment system).

In the majority of countries, permission to operate is given to universities or to programmes only if they meet quality standards.

However, quality assessment methods vary across countries. Moreover, these agencies still need to prove that they can lead to quality improvements.

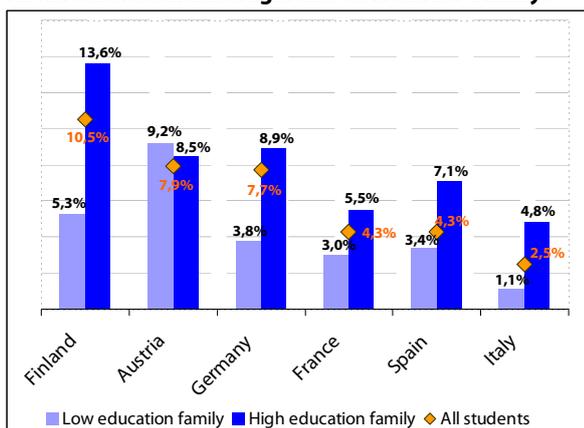
### Students mobility

In 2010, around 2% of learners are studying in an EHEA country other than their own. According to OECD, the Bologna Process has had "at best neutral effects" on students' horizontal mobility (during degree programmes). Mobility only increases if universities develop partnerships with compatible programmes. These programmes ensure that the credits earned abroad by students will be recognised in their home university. Moreover, there is an East to West imbalance of student mobility.

### Social dimension

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and people from non-traditional educational routes are still underrepresented in 39 countries.

**Figure 2: Enrolment abroad during studies still depends on the educational background of students' family.**



Source: [Eurostat/Eurostudent](#), 2009.

### Mixing Bologna with other reforms

In certain cases, the implementation of reforms deviated from Bologna intentions. This was due to different interpretations of

the Bologna Agenda. For instance, the OECD underlined that many universities were confused about what the Bologna Process really requires and what is up to the countries themselves to decide. Moreover, the OECD stressed that many governments have used the Process to implement reforms that have little or nothing to do with it.

### EU contribution

EU funded activities under the Erasmus Programme (1987) inspired Bologna priorities, e.g. the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. The Commission holds a seat in the BFUG and has financed Bologna conferences, seminars and studies.

The Commission has also been supporting the Bologna Process with the [Erasmus](#), [Erasmus Mundus](#) and [Tempus](#) programmes. For instance, the EU supports projects to promote lifelong learning in the Bologna Process. The EU also supports the adaptation of neighbouring countries' higher education systems to the Bologna requirements.

The Seventh EU Framework Programme for Research, the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme and the Structural Funds can also finance such initiatives.

### European Parliament

In its [Resolution on the Bologna Process and student mobility](#) (2008), the EP stressed that the increase in student mobility and the quality of educational systems should be priorities for the post-2010 Bologna process. Student mobility has consistently represented a budgetary priority for the EP. The EP also deplored the fact that many students can still not afford to study abroad. New means of financing mobility should be developed, such as interest-free or transferable loans.

Regarding quality of education, the EP stressed the importance of implementing the European Reference Frameworks<sup>8</sup>. Links with the European Research Area should also be developed.

However, as underlined by [a recent article](#), the EP remains practically excluded from the Process.

### Main stakeholders' views

The **European University Association** (EUA) noted universities must be given autonomy and adequate funding to implement the reforms. For EUA, the EHEA should be more focused on students, employability, mobility, attractiveness and social inclusion.

For the **European Students' Union** (ESU) the Bologna Process has brought benefits to millions of students. ESU considers that by 2020, the EHEA should be a reality for all European students, regardless of their origin, means or ability. A European mobility fund should be created. For ESU, insufficient attention has been paid to the socio-economic conditions of students. Moreover, ESU opposes the introduction or increase in tuition fees in the Process. For ESU, it is not acceptable that some countries carry out reforms in the name of Bologna that are in fact only a part of the national agenda.

The **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education** (ENQA) recognises the contribution of Bologna in the development of quality assurance procedures. ENQA will continue to support the development of quality assurance.

The **European association of professional higher education institutions** (EURASHE) considers that for the post-2010 era, operational objectives and indicators of progress should be set up. EURASHE's [Ten Commitments for the EHEA in 2020](#) stress

particularly EURASHE's will to increase the effectiveness of lifelong learning practices in the EHEA.

**Education International** (EI), representing teachers and education workers, stresses that attractive working conditions for academic staff are necessary to ensure the successful implementation of the Process. Moreover, too often national authorities do not involve academic staff in the reform process. For EI, the Bologna Process should not be based on a market rationale.

For **BUSINESSEUROPE**, raising workers' employability is a key issue in the context of Bologna: access to lifelong learning in universities must be improved.

### Perspectives: Bologna beyond 2010

#### New challenges

On a global scale, the demand for higher education is increasing. Moreover, current demographic trends may lead to a drastic reduction of students and academic staff. The implementation of reforms and the stagnation of public funding also create new pressures on universities. Furthermore, they will have to ensure their attractiveness and at the same time develop scientific cooperation with their counterparts.

In the Bologna context, a balance between the convergence of national higher education systems and respect for national diversity will also have to be found.

The dialogue between governments, universities and stakeholders will be a crucial issue as well.

#### The Bologna Agenda for the next decade

In Leuven (2009), Ministers [adopted](#) the priorities for the EHEA beyond 2010:

- Widening access to higher education (social dimension).

- Integrating lifelong learning into European education systems.
  - Increasing students' and workers employability.
  - Developing student-centred learning.
  - Fostering education, research and innovation.
  - Improving international openness.
  - Increasing mobility: in 2020, at least 20% of students graduating in the EHEA should have had a study or training period abroad.
  - Improving data collection.
  - Developing transparency tools, to make education systems easier to understand.
- Moreover, universities should seek new funding sources. However, ministers reaffirmed that public funding remains the main source of funds to guarantee equitable access and the development of universities.

In March 2010, the [Vienna-Budapest Declaration](#) officially launched the EHEA.

## Main references

[The Bologna Process Independent Assessment](#) / CHEPS, INHERK, ECOTEC, 2010.

[The Impact of the Bologna Process](#) / Eurydice, 2010.

[The EU Contribution to the Bologna Process](#) / European Commission, 2010.

[European Higher Education Reforms in the Context of the Bologna Process](#) / Witte, OECD, Higher Education to 2030 vol.2, chapter 7, 2009.

[Bologna Process Stocktaking Report](#) / Rauhvargers et al., 2009.

[Bologna At the Finish Line](#) / ESU, 2010.

[Bologna Beyond 2010](#) / BFUG, 2009.

[Trends 2010](#) / EUA, 2010.

## Disclaimer and Copyright

*This briefing is a summary of published information and does not necessarily represent the views of the author or the European Parliament. The document is exclusively addressed to the Members and staff of the European Parliament for their parliamentary work. Copyright © European Parliament, 2010. All rights reserved.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this briefing, "universities" means all higher education institutions.

<sup>2</sup> The Council of the EU adopted a [Resolution on Modernising Universities](#) (2007). Its goal is to increase the contribution of universities to the Lisbon Strategy and to the knowledge-based economy. The Commission identified nine key challenges for universities, such as ensuring their autonomy or funding. It proposed to invest at least 2% of GDP in higher education.

<sup>3</sup> **From 1999:** Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom; **from 2001:** Croatia, Cyprus, Liechtenstein, Turkey; **from 2003:** Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See, Russia, Serbia, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"; **from 2005:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; **from 2007:** Montenegro; **from 2010:** Kazakhstan.

<sup>4</sup> [European University Association](#) (EUA), [European Association of Institutions in Higher Education](#) (EURASHE), [European Students' Union](#) (ESU), [European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education](#) (ENQA), [Education International Pan-European Structure](#) and [BUSINESSEUROPE](#).

<sup>5</sup> Every two years, the Bologna work programme receives orientations from Ministerial Conferences. A Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) prepares these conferences. BFUG includes all the members and is chaired by the country holding the Presidency of the EU. Working groups and "Bologna Seminars" provide input to the BFUG.

<sup>6</sup> [Learning outcomes](#) are what learners may be expected to know, understand and be able to do on the basis of a given qualification.

<sup>7</sup> It contains generic descriptors for each cycle, based on learning outcomes and competences, as well as credit ranges in the first and second cycles.

<sup>8</sup> Bologna Qualifications Framework, European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, and the Lisbon Recognition Convention.