

Dr. Jan Sadlak  
Director UNESCO-CEPES

## **The Bologna Process: A Regional Response to Global Challenges**

[Text presented at the UNU/UNESCO International Conference on *Pathways Towards a Shared Future: Changing Roles of Higher Education in a Globalized World*, 29-30 August, Tokyo, Japan]

Let me start with an observation that even though it is not easy to provide a neat definition of the term “globalization”, and without making a value judgment about its impact, it is hard to deny that it is a major force in setting up a theoretical as well as policy framework for a growing number of domains of human activity. It has also become a more complex one as it no longer limits its impact to a specific domain or economic sector.

Probably the most telling aspect is the globalization of telecommunications which has made the Internet the “fifth power”, and as one journalist recently observed, “the laptop is now more powerful than the sword”. Telecommunications have also given rise to an important characteristic of present-day-globalization, that of the compression of both distance and time. Actually, I believe that we are fast approaching an era of what I would call, “applied globalization” when we consider the speed and depth of the impact of global developments on our collective and individual lives.

In particular, this new stage of globalization is characterized by the emergence of “knowledge societies” in which industry and higher education are uniting to convert the intellectual resources of a region, country or city into contributing factors in order to achieve economic growth and social gains. This is the reason why one of the leading figures in modern management is so familiar to Japan – that of the recently deceased Peter Drucker, who advocated the central importance of “knowledge workers” as important actors in a modern economy.

The key arguments for current policies towards higher education and science is that economic, social and health systems [and security] are organically dependent on knowledge and derived from technological innovations, and that higher education institutions are the largest and unique contributors to the development of human capital and innovative products based on cutting-edge technologies for which academic research is essential. In other words, the university is seen as both a powerhouse and a nursery.

Evidently, in order to have a successful policy, the argument I describe needs to be supplemented by the existence of legal frameworks, organizational arrangements and programs to facilitate the smooth exchange of not only capital and goods, but even more so of students and academics between countries and institutions, as well as between academia and industry. This general framework has been an important contributing force to the emergence of an initiative which is now being known as the Bologna Process, which aims to create a European Higher Education Area by the year 2010.

### **The Bologna Process - the smaller the world gets, the bigger you have to think**

A brief and simplified explanation for the emergence of the Bologna Process, is that in Europe, despite a list of tangible and intangible contemporary examples of successful economic, social and cultural achievements, there is a growing awareness that it needs to change in many ways if it is to realize its potential and be able to respond to the unrelenting impact of the challenges and opportunities created by globalization. Higher education and research were identified as the missing links in a set of ambitious goals and development strategies - known as the Lisbon Agenda, which would make Europe [more specifically that of the European Union] the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, goals which were later tempered somewhat, but still retained the essence of becoming a regional world-leader among “knowledge societies”.

However the Bologna Process is more than a response to the Lisbon Agenda, which, being a policy of the European Union, covers only 27 countries in the region. It is the prevailing view also in other parts of Europe, that continuous economic growth, improved competitiveness and higher and stable employment in the region depend on the successful adoption and application of new technologies as well as a steady supply of skilled labour. Enabling Europe to cope with the world's evolution towards globalization, and with the rapid changes in the scientific fields, a clear demand for researchers who have the experience of working in multi-cultural, cross-disciplinary research environments has arisen. The traditional "one life - one workplace" approach can - today in a globalized world - be considered obsolete, as it no longer meets the requirements of fast-growing, knowledge-based industry. Only by consistent actions in the area of higher education and science, can Europe successfully hope to respond to globalization.

In a certain way, it was fortunate for the future of the Bologna Process that it was originally launched with unusual modesty when four ministers from France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom met in Paris and adopted the *Sorbonne Declaration* in May 1998. Yet it seems that it “struck gold”, when only a few months later in June 1999, 29 ministers had already committed their respective countries to embark on new strategies for higher education by adopting the *Bologna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area*. The overall objective laid down in the declaration was the need for “increasing the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education”. It should be mentioned that the intention was never to establish a single “European system of higher education”, but rather to enable a harmonization of systems by setting up Europe-wide standards to facilitate interaction at the study programme, institution and system levels.

The accession growth continued as new countries committed themselves to the requirements adopted by consecutive ministerial meetings [so-called Action Lines]. The number increased to 33 countries in Prague (June 2001), to 39 countries in Berlin (September 2003), to 45 countries in Bergen (May 2005) and most recently to 46 countries at the latest ministerial meeting held in June 2007 in London. At present, it is a truly pan-European initiative and the only European country which is not a member of

the Bologna Process is Belarus as this country is not a party of the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe, a prerequisite for accession to the Bologna Process.

The main objectives of the Bologna Process are:

- to increase the attractiveness, transparency and mobility within higher education
- to facilitate the recognition of studies and qualifications
- to adapt higher education better to the needs and fluctuations of the labour market
- to enhance the role of higher education in democratic society.

The principle instruments which were adopted for achieving the creation of a European Higher Education Area include the following:

- a three-tier degree structure articulating higher education in terms of undergraduate and graduate studies – namely as Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees [a creation of *a common degree structure*];
- the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) [creation of *a common recording measurement* of acquired knowledge and skills];
- a so-called *Diploma Supplement*, which should facilitate transferability of the period of study and awarded academic qualifications, foremost in order to improve the international mobility of students as well as the attractiveness of “studies in Europe” for those coming from other regions [creation of *a common informational tool*];
- Across-the-board recognition of the importance of quality assurance mechanisms, foremost through accreditation as well as benchmarking and other instruments.

I think that many people are actually rather surprised that something like the Bologna Process has seen the light of the day. It can be described both as a “necessity” and a “wonder” of higher education policy.

A **necessity** because Europe, in addition to the already presented arguments, has to respond to:

- the need to increase participation rates in higher education, since only a few countries have a level that can assure an active role in a knowledge society – which is accepted to be somewhere around 50 percent of the traditional college age-group, which would not be possible to achieve with traditionally structured and longer study programmes;
- the imperatives of lifelong learning and professional development which are determining a capacity to react to rapid changes in the labour market;
- the necessity for greater international as well as inter-institutional mobility;
- the need to deal with a deficit of researchers - foremost those at the doctoral level.

On the other hand, it is also a **wonder of policy-making** taking into consideration:

- that it is a fully voluntary process;
- that contrary to many other areas, it is foremost a governmental process [the decision-making body being the ministerial meetings held each second year], and

- that it is a fairly conflict-free interaction of principal stake-holders – governments, higher education institutions – academics and students, and employers. All are represented in the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) which is in charge of the implementation of the decisions of the ministerial meetings;
- that the funding of reform required by the introduction of consecutive objectives of the Bologna Process are entirely dependent on national and institutional budgets;
  - the hurdles of “harmonization” within historically heterogeneous systems, e.g.; French, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Scandinavian, Soviet and post-Soviet, and the characteristics of their individual structures, organization of studies, institutional models, etc. with strong attachments to national/state systems;
  - the absence of a top-down international legal framework and the almost total dependence on national legislation (with the exception of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention which was adopted in 1997 – prior to the Bologna Process);
  - the flexible and relatively small organizational and secretarial arrangement for governance of the Bologna Process – the ministerial meetings, the Bologna Follow-Up Group and its thematic working groups;
  - the absence of rigid implementation mechanisms and procedures, but accompanied with a stock-taking reporting system demonstrating the progress achieved in the essential areas for the implementation of the set objectives. In this regard it should be pointed out that the level of expectations with regard to implementation is clearly moving upwards - the Bologna Process having now moved from a “stage of emphasis on structures” to a “quality stage” for which the main measure is the establishment of Register of European Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies.

### **Why the Bologna Process Works**

There is no doubt that the current European scene of policy debate on higher education and science is delineated by two pan-European initiatives – the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) due to become a reality by the year 2010, and the European Research Area (ERA). To a great extent the two “Areas” are viewed as convergent in certain respects, and the issues related to the education, training, and development of “human resources”- doctoral studies and qualifications included - are rightly viewed as bridges between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. Increasingly, these issues are going to be part of the debate on the future development of higher education and research in Europe.

One of the most important effects of the Bologna Process on European higher education has been the reorientation from “in-puts” to “out-puts” when it comes to the organization and educational effectiveness of study programmes, especially from the perspective of acquired competencies and skills. This reorientation reflects a growing public interest in economic and social usability of education. Education, in particular higher education, is seen as an important supply of human resources and as such, must contribute to the optimization of the regional and national “location” in a global competition, as well as the smooth functioning of social systems. In this context, emphasis is accorded to the

acquisition of “competences” relevant from the point of view of employability, and “effectiveness of education processes” from the point of view of established, national and international, standards of quality and benchmarks.

Even if not directly affected, it is nevertheless hard to disregard the importance of the Bologna Process to make European higher education more attractive and competitive at the institutional, national and regional levels which are important features in the context of on-going negotiations under the GATS conducted by the World Trade Organization (WTO). This is why higher education, while regarded as a public good is by others being perceived as just another component of the progressively more and more international “service sector.” There is increasing a call to treat education much as we treat other areas of international trade. Obviously, this is a hotly disputed issue outside and inside the educational community, and in the context of the external dimensions of the Bologna Process.

### **The Bologna Process and Humanizing Globalization through the Development of Higher Education**

The range of developments and pace of change, allow for a cautious optimism that the European Higher Education Area is going to be in place by the year 2010. Taking into account the degree of diversification of the national systems of higher education in Europe, it is an ambitious and complex political and academic scenario, which in the course of time will substantially transform many aspects of higher education at institutional, national, and international levels within and outside Europe.

This initiative represents the most significant event in European higher education since the days of expansion and the reforms of the late 1960s. It is going to bring about profound changes of a sort that will alter the so-called Humboldtian model of the university that has been the dominating conceptual and organizational framework for higher education in Europe for almost two centuries. While the encroaching changes may in the end not be quite so momentous, it is nevertheless quite remarkable that despite all their historical and institutional differences, important decisions have been made which should lead to the harmonization of higher education systems across a prevailing number of European countries. Such a system should be highly attractive to international students within and outside of Europe, and should also democratize international student mobility. The Bologna Process has the potential to offer such a vision of higher education.

There is a growing concern with regard to the issue of the fair distribution of the economic benefits of globalization. While in the past the central axes of divergence between the between highly industrialized and developing countries, was in the area of economy, it is now a growing concern that an adverse affect of globalization might also be observed in the area of “knowledge and skill” capacity to meet the challenges of globalization. The role of higher education in this context is more important than ever. Therefore there is a growing understanding of the need to humanize globalization in order to reduce the risk of it being a more divisive than uniting factor for our world today, which is marked more clearly than ever by the global nature of the problems we face in

such areas as the environment, migration, water resources, the use of space and the seas, equitable access to knowledge and new technologies, the secure use of nuclear energy, terrorism, organized crime, epidemic spread of diseases, etc. These realities call for global action even if the actual solutions lie at the regional, national and local levels.

While fully understanding the interconnections between many of these issues and the need for comprehensive policy and joint actions, it is important to ensure that globalization does not result in a simplistic uniformization of our economic, social, and cultural landscapes. There must still remain ample room for “divergences” that must be respected - from the way we run companies to the way we organize schools and universities. Institutions of higher education can help educate citizens to understand and promote these differences. Globalization implicitly requires that we learn to adapt to a new kind of world, one of the characteristics of which is what I would call the prevalence of “multiple identities” and “multiple accountabilities.”

In a constantly changing global economy, regions and countries need to formulate policies which can exploit existing and emerging markets, while at the same time searching for an identity which can differentiate them from their rivals – since the ultimate ‘trick’ [or winning formula] is to maintain exclusivity while being global.

In this regard, the vision promoted within the Bologna Process is clearly a confirmation of an understanding that the European Higher Education Area is part of a global context. It is quite telling that the title of the last meeting of ministers responsible for higher education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process (London, 17-18 May 2007) was “*Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalized world*”. By adopting a strategy document entitled “*The European Higher Education Area in a Global Setting*”, the ministers committed their respective countries to move ahead in such policy areas as: improving information, and promoting the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA, strengthening cooperation based on partnership, intensifying policy dialogue, and improving recognition.”

Further evidence that the Bologna Process approach is indeed responding to the challenges of our time, is seen not only in that 46 European countries now see it as meeting their needs and expectations, but that certain Mediterranean and Central Asian countries are now also attempting to follow the same path of reforms.

In conclusion, it can be considered, with some anticipatory credit, that the Bologna Process is not simply an ambitious-sounding political declaration, but has proved to be a real collective commitment by politicians, the academic community and other principal stakeholders, that it is not only a vital necessity for the future economic and cultural development of Europe, but also demonstrates how the challenges of globalization can be met by developing higher education.