

Alan Johnson's speech at the Bologna Seminar on "Using learning Outcomes": Heriot-Watt University (Edinburgh Conference Centre), 1 July 2004

Introduction

Good afternoon. It's a great pleasure to join you today, albeit briefly. There is no truth that my short time here today is due to a refocusing of the Skills Strategy to penalty taking!

I am grateful to the Scottish Executive for inviting me. And for giving me the opportunity to add my own thoughts on the Bologna process.

We recognise the crucial role of Higher Education in helping Europe to sustain a competitive global presence, in line with the Lisbon agenda. As one of its founder members, the UK Government has been a firm supporter of the Bologna process. We share its aim of encouraging and helping closer collaboration between universities and colleges across Europe, promoting mobility for students, researchers and staff across Europe; and building a European Higher Education Area.

I would like to share with you, briefly today, the UK Government's perspective on how we believe the Bologna process can help to create the kind of European Higher Education Area that we would all , and the role that emphasising learning outcomes can play in achieving this objective.

It is appropriate that the seminar is taking place in a university which has a strong international outlook, welcoming each year, as it does, students from over 80 countries worldwide. I understand that 20% of Heriot Watt postgraduate students are from other EU countries – adding to a total of 45% the population of overseas postgraduate students.

In addition, the University has more than 9,500 students on external programmes in 140 countries worldwide; on top of more than 6,300 students on campus.

As one of the UK's leading universities for business and industry, Heriot-Watt has a reputation for innovative education, enterprise and leading-edge research; educating tomorrow's technologists, professionals and thinkers – high calibre graduates who are highly sought after by employers.

I know that, under the EC's Socrates-Erasmus programme, Heriot-Watt has exchange links with over 100 institutions in Europe. The university encourages students in all disciplines - languages, business, science and engineering and textiles – to seize the opportunity to study abroad as an integral part of their course: which the Bologna process is also seeking to encourage and facilitate.

Encouraging student mobility

We want to see as many Higher Education courses as possible offering a period of study abroad; and as many students as possible taking advantage of them. The benefits are enormous.

In our increasingly European labour market, well over 50% of UK trade was with the EU15 in 2003. However, research indicates that 20% of employers lose business through language skills shortages. And 45% report language or cultural issues as barriers to international trade.

The introduction of a comprehensive language strategy can increase a company's export sales by 50% or more in a single year.

Student mobility is becoming more and more important in giving students language and other skills to meet business needs. It helps them to gain a broader education, operate in a multi-cultural society and ensures the economic success of international businesses and Europe generally.

The role of Higher Education

But Higher Education has an equally important role to play in promoting social

inclusion. Not only does it create jobs and prosperity, it expands opportunity for those who can benefit from it.

At the same time, it is essentially a market. One in which the successful universities and colleges are those who can respond best to the sophisticated demands of their students who are becoming increasingly well-informed and actively looking for opportunities to equip themselves to better meet their lifelong learning needs.

Universities and colleges need to offer a flexible and diverse range of qualifications, based on what works best for the needs of their students. We need to ensure that all graduates -including those who study traditional academic disciplines - have the right skills to survive in today's fast changing work environment. Our domestic policies are designed to help more people enter Higher Education - widening access, increasing participation; and benefiting both the individual and the economy's need for higher level skills.

Support for Bologna process – diversity and flexibility

Responding to the Lisbon agenda on competitiveness, the Bologna process is working towards the same, fundamental aim - making European Higher Education world-class. It seeks to build on what works best and not let Higher Education across Europe become bland or stale.

We believe that for the European Higher Education Area to be successful, it needs to build on the strengths and traditions of each country's Higher Education systems:

- It should promote and celebrate diversity of Higher Education provision.
- It should be a flexible framework to offer students what they need and to allow our universities and colleges to respond to the needs of the 21st Century knowledge economy.

- It must not inadvertently become a barrier to diversity and responsiveness.

Working with our European partners, we feel that there is a great opportunity for us to play a fuller part in creating a new Europe of knowledge. Learning from what other countries are doing in some areas and offering our own experiences in others.

We believe that the rich diversity of Higher Education and research possibilities, available throughout Europe, are a sign of strength and competitiveness. That's why we support the aims of the Bologna process in bringing European Higher Education more closely together.

But, at the same time, we believe that we should retain the diversity in individual countries' Higher Education systems.

Importance of Learning Outcomes

One example of this diversity is variation in the length of courses leading to similar qualifications throughout European Higher Education which is not always seen as the positive indication of flexibility in meeting students and employers' needs that we believe it should be.

Indeed, suggestions that the rest of Europe is adopting a rigid 3 year Bachelor degree +2 year Masters degree or, as in some countries, a 4 year + 2 year qualification pattern have fuelled particular concerns in the UK.

There are fears that popular, flexible and internationally recognised degrees, such as our one year Masters courses, may not be accepted elsewhere in Europe.

Of course you can't build a Higher Education Area unless you have qualifications systems which are comparable, and, perhaps even more

importantly, are perceived to be of equal value. The early moves to achieve this were welcome, but will not be enough on their own.

We favour an approach centring on the effectiveness of students' learning experiences and achievements, rather than on input measures such as course duration. Using length of time spent studying on its own - with no consideration of what we expect a learner to know, understand, or do at the end of the learning - is simply not an appropriate criterion for assessing the 'value' of a qualification. What's more important to us is the high quality of the course studied and that students achieving a qualification have met the expectations set out for them – clearly and transparently - in advance.

We believe that undertaking a learning outcomes approach is the right way forward - with the issue of course length becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Flexible provision helps our aim of increasing participation and widening access. And such flexibility is dependent on us being able to move away from traditional course patterns and lengths, and to be ready to be innovative and responsive to learner needs.

There is a strong consensus across all sectors of UK Higher Education on the benefits of the learning outcomes approach. It is highly valued by students, Higher Education Institutions and employers; and I am pleased to see that it appears to be increasingly accepted elsewhere in Europe.

This is evidenced by discussions at previous seminars in the Bologna process - such as the one in Zurich in October 2002, on the use of credits. And the one in Helsinki, in March last year, on Masters Degrees. It is also seen in the references to learning outcomes that were incorporated into the Bologna process at last year's Berlin Ministerial conference.

Conclusion

In short, the role of Bologna should be to support European universities and colleges in playing to their strengths, to meet the challenges of the Europe of Knowledge.

We now have 40 countries across Europe committed to working together to build a successful and attractive European Higher Education Area by the end of the decade.

One that meets the Lisbon agenda on competitiveness; and one which plays the strengths of our own HE system shorter, more effective Higher Education courses that are high in quality while flexible in the qualifications on offer; and which meet the needs of both students and employers.

Above all, a successful Higher Education Area will be responsive - not rigid – and will allow diversity to flourish. With learning outcomes underpinning the entire system.

I look forward to hearing how discussion of this is furthered during the remainder of this conference.