



**BOLOGNA PROCESS OFFICIAL SEMINAR**  
**THE EXTERNAL DIMENSION OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS**  
***“PUTTING EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA ON THE MAP:  
DEVELOPING STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTIVENESS”***  
Athens, 24<sup>th</sup> -26<sup>th</sup> June 2006

**TOWARDS THE “EXTERNAL DIMENSION”  
STRATEGY**

*Report from the Bologna Seminar  
on the External Dimension of the Bologna Process*

Prof. Pavel Zgaga, Rapporteur

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A working weekend of the Bologna Process Official Seminar entitled *Putting European Higher Education Area on the map: developing strategies for attractiveness*\* made another step further in defining “the external dimension of the Bologna Process” and gave new contributions to drafting a strategy on the attractiveness of the EHEA and cooperation with other parts of the world. Participants coming from Ministries of Higher Education and from higher education institutions of the 25 countries of the Bologna Process (not only European Union countries), representatives of the European Commission as well as representatives of 7 non-European countries (OECD members) and 10 international organisations formed a lively discussion circle which has been broad enough to address issues of the “external dimension” from various relevant angles.

A particular advantage of this seminar lies in the fact that “the Bologna family” has an ample opportunity to present its features, dilemmas and developments to colleagues from other parts of the world as well as to listen to their presentations and comments and to discuss – to their mutual satisfaction – some crucial themes of the internationalisation of higher education of our times.

Thus, this seminar is a true contribution to fulfilling the mandate of Ministers from the Bergen Communiqué:

*“The European Higher Education Area must be open and should be attractive to other parts of the world. Our contribution to achieving education for all should be based on the principle of sustainable development and be in accordance with the ongoing international work on developing guidelines for quality provision of cross-border higher education. We reiterate that in international academic cooperation, academic values should prevail.*

*We see the European Higher Education Area as a partner of higher education systems in other regions of the world, stimulating balanced student and staff exchange and cooperation between higher education institutions. We underline the importance of intercultural understanding and respect. We look forward to enhancing the understanding of the Bologna Process in other continents by sharing our experiences of reform processes with neighbouring regions. We stress the need for dialogue on issues of mutual interest. We see the need to identify partner regions and intensify the exchange of ideas and experiences with those regions. We ask the Follow-up Group to elaborate and agree on a strategy for the external dimension.”*

### **The emerging “external dimension” agenda**

The Bologna Process has been a multiple challenge from its beginning; yet it hasn’t been dealing only with new study structures, qualification frameworks and quality assurance systems, recognition issues and employability, but also with defining rather new (and not always clear) phenomena and with adoption of a new language. The new “Bologna” terminology sometimes creates problems in our understanding and

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\* The seminar was organized by the Hellenic Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs and the Managing Authority of the Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training with the collaboration of the Academic Cooperation Association and the Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency (Athens, 24 – 26 June, 2006). Organizers intentionally chose these days to make it possible for some participants to also join the OECD Ministerial Conference held on 27 June (or vice versa).

communicating; however, sometimes vague terminology in “European” English – in addition, they are translated and re-translated in various European languages – is only a part of a problem. The fact is that phenomena which we would like to name in order to be able to manage them, live their own dynamic life and don’t allow to close their potential into ready made definitions before they develop this potential to a full extent. Vague terms in our languages are most often a simple result of this trend.

The “*external dimension*” is probably a good case to analyse this – not only linguistic but conceptual – aspect. It started to be used broadly in the “Bologna slang” after the Prague Conference of 2001. However, it is possible to trace its roots in previous documents on higher education in Europe. Discussing the external dimension today and drafting a strategy for the external dimension should take into account previous conceptual developments: either to continue and to expand its logic or to revise it and to change it when necessary.

The story goes back to the previous decade and could be very extensive. Let’s mention only few landmarks in its trajectory. A very clear one can be found within debates on the role of the “*European dimension in higher education*” not less than fifteen years ago: the *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community* (1991) stated that besides the “European dimension in higher education” there are also “historic linkages and relationships between higher education institutions in the different Member States and various countries of the world”. It was also said that an enhanced role for education and training in the external relations of the Community is evolving for a number of reasons and that there has always been an “*extra-European Community dimension*” in the relationships between higher education institutions. The *Memorandum* gives some important conclusions:

»*While it is vital to the future of the Community that the European dimension in higher education be emphasised and strengthened, this extra-EC dimension is of fundamental importance to an open European Community, deriving strength from cooperation and interaction across the world*”.

*Europe must not only strengthen its own identity, but it must do so in a political, economic and cultural equilibrium with the rest of the world*«.

As the next landmark we can quote a well known sentence from the *Sorbonne Declaration* (1998): “The international recognition and attractive potential of our systems are directly related to their external and internal readabilities. A system, in which two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, should be recognized for international comparison and equivalence, seems to emerge”.

In the same line, the language of the *Bologna Declaration* (1999) was already much more direct: “We must in particular look at the objective of increasing the international competitiveness of the European systems of higher education. The vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal that its culture has for other countries. We need to ensure that the European higher education system acquires a world-wide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions«.

Here, the concept of the “external dimension” was not born yet; however, it was certainly conceived. As we can see, during its “pre-natal phase”, both *attractiveness* and *competitiveness* were already pronounced. At the beginning of a new millennium, numerous discussions that accompanied, on one hand, the launching of the Lisbon

strategy (2000-2001) and, on the other hand, the Salamanca European convention of universities (2001) facilitated that during their Prague follow-up meeting (2002)

*»Ministers agreed on the importance of enhancing attractiveness of European higher education to students from Europe and other parts of the world. The readability and comparability of European higher education degrees world-wide should be enhanced by the development of a common framework of qualifications, as well as by coherent quality assurance and accreditation / certification mechanisms and by increased information efforts.*

*Ministers particularly stressed that the quality of higher education and research is and should be an important determinant of Europe's international attractiveness and competitiveness. Ministers agreed that more attention should be paid to the benefit of a European Higher Education Area with institutions and programmes with different profiles. They called for increased collaboration between the European countries concerning the possible implications and perspectives of transnational education.«*

In late 2001, fulfilling the ministerial mandate from Prague, the BFUG established a *Working Group on External Dimension*. Now, the expression of “external dimension” started to be used in the “Bologna slang” openly. In its *Conclusions*, the Working Group reported to the BFUG meeting (held in Athens, 20 June 2003 – almost exactly three years ago) that the Berlin communiqué should contain the following elements:

- *»Ministers agree that the attractiveness and openness of the European higher education should be reinforced through cooperation with regions in other parts of the world.*
- *They confirm their readiness to further develop scholarship programmes for students from third countries.*
- *They undertake to win acceptance, within the relevant frameworks, for the need to base all international cooperation as any trade in higher education on academic values and on clear and transparent standards for quality.*
- *They encourage the promotion of the idea and the good practice of the Bologna Process by inviting representatives of other regions of the world to Bologna seminars and conferences«*

Indeed, in Berlin (September 2003), Ministers welcomed “the interest shown by other regions of the world in the development of the European Higher Education Area” and agreed that “the attractiveness and openness of the European higher education should be reinforced. They confirm their readiness to further develop scholarship programmes for students from third countries”. They also declared that “transnational exchanges in higher education should be governed on the basis of academic quality and academic values, and agree to work in all appropriate fora to that end”. Last but not least, they encouraged »the co-operation with regions in

other parts of the world by opening Bologna seminars and conferences to representatives of these regions«.

On the other hand, Ministers also agreed on a new rule on applications for membership in the Bologna process: “Countries party to the European Cultural Convention shall be eligible for membership of the European Higher Education Area provided that they at the same time declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education«.

Thus, the »external dimension of the European Higher Education Area« got also an indirect *geographical definition*: it stretches over the external borders of the 45 countries so far.

### **What is meant by the “external dimension”?**

It is not possible to define the “external dimension of the Bologna Process” with a single definition: there are several elements interlinked in this expression. The “new” Working Group on the External Dimension of the Bologna Process (established by BFUG in late 2005) has recently identified several horizons or “agendas” in which the “external dimension” appears in Bologna documents:

- (a) *a competitiveness and attractiveness agenda*, which is to result in an inflow of non-European students and scholars into European higher education; complemented by
- (b) *a partnership and cooperation agenda*, in which collaborative activity will democratically benefit both European and non-European higher education, and from which notably commercial motives should be absent (“academic values”);
- (c) *a dialogue approach*, by means of which the EHEA would foster the exchange of experience and ideas on higher education reform issues with representatives of other world regions; and which would develop concrete mechanisms to facilitate the implementation of the “partnership and cooperation agenda” (see b) between the EHEA and the respective country/region;
- (d) *an information (didactic) approach*, by means of which the EHEA would be correctly presented and explained in other world regions.

Therefore, when we refer to the »external dimension of the Bologna Process« we should bear in mind all four »agendas«; yet, it is possible that further one(s) could be also identified.

Participants at this seminar were fully aware of the complexity of the “external dimension”. Some presenters give evidence that the existing national “external dimension” strategies can promote – and in certain cases already promote – the attractiveness of the emerging common European Higher Education Area. However, the “external dimension” strategies at a national level and at a common EHEA level can’t be the same. *The Bologna Process needs a common strategy on the external dimension on top of the national “external dimension” strategies.* Nevertheless, certain hesitation was expressed among some participants that a common EHEA “centre” and/or a common internet portal may widen the already existing gap between countries that are already close to the final goal and those just started on the Bologna road.

On the other side, it was stressed that “internal dimension” and “external dimension” agendas should not be divided, in particular not mechanically. Developing an “external dimension” strategy shouldn’t be a simple repainting of a façade; this would definitively turn foreign students and academics away and jeopardize the “internal dimension” as well. For that reason, reinforcing the “internal dimension” (e.g. transparency, compatibility, quality, recognition etc.) of the Bologna Process is the best approach to strengthen attractiveness of European higher education and its “external dimension” as a whole. Parallels were made also between the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy – not always without polemic elements – that crossed

in various issues dealing with modernisation of European universities and problems of their (under)performance.

One plenary session dealt in full with questions of quality in relation to the “external dimension”. Quality issues were not in very front of the Bologna Process during its first years but after Berlin conference they have deserved a continuously increasing attention. It is interesting to mention that in 2005, two important documents were agreed: one within the Bologna trajectory and the other within the global context.

There are several parallels between the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (adopted in Bergen) and the *OECD/UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*. These parallels are in particular visible if they are observed in light of the “external dimension”. Both documents are not binding; both aim at voluntary implementation and both have been developed by educational community. Yet, it is particularly important that similar trends that have led individual European national higher education systems towards adopting common “Bologna” standards and guidelines characterise global higher education context as well.

At the seminar, the “external dimension” was considered also in relation to the role of universities and other institutions as well as students. Fast internationalisation of European universities has brought many new opportunities as well as responsibilities. Thus, international strategies entered also institutional agendas. To respond new opportunities, institutions should define strategies that correspond to their specific roles, profiles, ambitions and environments. There is a high consensus among universities that international cooperation brings, first of all, an increased opportunity for mobile students but also benefits for all students studying now in a more international environment. Also here, it is evident that promotion and attractiveness of an individual institution depends mostly on efficient implementation of the “internal dimension”: e.g. quality, transparency, autonomy and funding. In addition, students stress also the specific values of internationalisation like multicultural experience and more rich learning and research environment “affected” by international students, teachers and researchers.

As it was stated in the *Berlin communiqué* that “the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself”; it could be also argued that the primary responsibility for attractiveness of European Higher Education Area lies with higher education institutions themselves. However, it is far better if they act as academic networks that alone, fragmented and separated. Of course, systemic (e.g. legislative) and financial support within national environments is decisive for their success. Yet, there are also other important levers of a successful promotion in a global arena: these are students and their associations (e.g. ESIB, AEGEE, ESN, etc.) as well as international associations (e.g. EAIE, ACA, NAFSA, thematic networks etc.). As it was argued at the seminar, their potential is not fully used yet.

## Conclusions and Recommendations of the Seminar

On basis of rich plenary discussions and reports from working groups (these reports include an even more extended list of proposals and recommendations), the following conclusions and recommendations were synthesized:

**A)** The possible contents of the *external dimension strategy* (in 7 points), drafted by the Working Group on the External Dimension of the Bologna Process and presented to the participants of the Seminar, is seen as a very good basis for elaboration of “the external strategy for the EHEA”.

**B)** Further on, BFUG and the Working Group on the External Dimension of the Bologna Process are asked to consider the following recommendations and to include them into working documents for the London ministerial conference in 2007:

**1.** *At the competitiveness and attractiveness horizon*, actions should be taken to improve the performance of European higher education. Competitiveness in higher education aims at developing diverse, qualitative, efficient and well performing universities; only such universities can really attract European and international students. Competition should not be necessarily seen in opposition to cooperation: a firm academic cooperation, e.g. through quality networks and projects that strengthen critical mass of higher education institutions, can importantly increase the competitiveness of European higher education as a whole. On the other side, competition in a global context should be also seen as an incentive to further strengthen institutional cooperation.

Concrete measures should be taken to attract international students as for example to organise European higher education fairs and media campaigns on one side as well as to create European study centres and centres of excellence on the other. Good practice from some countries suggests that extra budget provided for international students’ scholarships as well as for accommodation of international students and researchers could slightly improve the existing situation. On the systemic side, a European standard of acceptance for international students should be developed and a code of good conduct for dealing with visa problems. Europe also needs to strengthen its alumni-networks worldwide. Last but not least, a network of ambassadors of European higher education or »Europe promoters« in major third countries could be established.

**2.** *At the partnership and cooperation horizon*, different aspects and approaches – also the regional ones – have to be developed and supported because Europe is not a homogenous whole and it can’t be understood as such in other world regions. Approaches with the developed world have to differ from approaches to the developing countries. Cooperation with the developing world regions should be based on partnership and solidarity and be considered in particular with the goal of sustainability.

European universities have a long tradition of partnership and cooperation with universities in other parts of the world; today, the European Commission’s programmes (e.g. Erasmus Mundus, Jean Monnet etc.) along the existing national schemes enable universities to open new pages in the history of their international cooperation. Existing networks should be used to connect European Higher education Area and higher education areas in other parts of the world. The creation of consortia

of universities and higher education stakeholder organizations in the EHEA and third countries for systematic and integrated cooperation activity would be an important improvement of existing practices. Activity to take place inside such consortia could be the joint delivery of graduate-level study programmes with integrated mobility phases of study in the other continent (joint and double degrees, etc.), measures aiming at institutional development and capacity building, human resource development, and curriculum development. Joint research activities should be an integral part of this agenda. Last but not least: the complex area of mutual recognition of higher education qualifications within a global context should be also addressed within this horizon.

**3.** *At the dialogue horizon*, countries of the Bologna Process can share their practice and experiences with other regions of the world which encounter similar challenges and tendencies in the development of higher education systems. Interested countries and/or organizations from abroad should have possibility to join Bologna events and to use European good practices as well as to share their comments and their own good practices in a common global forum. Enhanced cooperation with other world regions can be a new stimulus for a greater integration.

Wherever possible, the policy dialogue should be based on existing fora, such as the EU-LAC Follow-up Committee or the EU-China Policy Dialogue. Policies should be tailor-made for each region and take due account of relevant EU policy (for example the EU Neighbourhood Policy). In addition, new concrete measures can be taken to open further possibilities, e.g. to create a “Bologna Visitor Programme” (to fund participation in selected Bologna-related conferences and seminars in Europe) or a higher education policy forum, involving representatives of European and third-country governments and higher education stakeholders; etc.

**4.** Last but not least, *at the information horizon*, the establishment of a comprehensive EHEA portal is unanimously recommended, under certain rules and conditions which should be carefully considered and developed. The content should be general and easy to understand. Different target groups (students, academics, policy makers, other higher education stakeholders) should be addressed in different ways. Working Group on the External Dimension could make a first investigation on this issue. Greece, through the Minister of Education, has already expressed its willingness to host such a portal. In addition, a concise description of the Bologna Process for other parts of the world is needed (prepared by the BFUG) as well as a set of Bologna information points could be established worldwide.

## **A conclusion**

At the end, few words for a conclusion: Athens is not a meeting place of an official Bologna seminar for the first time. In February 2003, on the way towards the Berlin Conference, Greece hosted another important Bologna seminar dealing with the *social dimension*. Results of that seminar are obvious and widely known. This time the seminar changed a dimension – the *external dimension* – but participants expressed a hope that results will be influential and lead to success again. To support these hopes and to make them realistic, the future stocktaking exercises should encompass also implementation issues of the foreseen commonly agreed “Bologna external dimension” strategy.



The next opportunity to continue debates on the external dimension of the Bologna Process will be given already at the end of September 2006 – at the Oslo Official Seminar. The Seminar website has been already set up: <http://www.bolognaoslo.com>.