

# European Higher Education Area

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The European Ministers of education in Bologna on 19th of June 1999 signed the Joint Declaration. This declaration, known as Bologna Declaration, started the Bologna Process which goal is creation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 (see Appendix).

The European Higher Education Area has the aim to help the free movement of people as one of the four priorities of the European Union, to increase the attractiveness of the European higher education institutions and to establish knowledge based society.

## SORBONNE DECLARATION [1]

The four Ministers of Education for France, Germany, Italy and United Kingdom signed Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system on 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1998 in Sorbonne. A Europe of Knowledge is the main goal in this declaration. The necessity of the creation of the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent is underlined. The Universities in a large extent have shaped the basic elements of the common European higher education system and continue to play a pivotal role for their development.

Actually with the Sorbonne declaration has started the process known later as Bologna process.

## BOLOGNA DECLARATION [2]

Many European Ministers expressed later with letters their approval of the initiative started with the Sorbonne declaration. Next year a meeting of the European Ministers of education took place in Bologna. Between the two meetings the Joint Declaration draft was prepared. The declaration was entitled European Higher Education Area. 29 ministers signed the Bologna declaration. In this declaration the basic parameters of EHEA was described:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system.
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.
- Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system - as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility.
- Promotion of student mobility.
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.

- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

## SALAMANCA CONVENTION [3]

Over 300 European higher education institutions and their main representative organisations gathered in Salamanca on 29-30 March 2001. Their purpose was to prepare their input to the Prague meeting of the Ministers in charge of higher education in the countries involved in the Bologna process. The document called "Shaping the European Higher Education Area" was signed.

The basic principles for EHEA building up were defined – autonomy with accountability; education as a public responsibility; research based higher education and organising diversity (future depends on its ability to organise this valuable diversity effectively to produce positive outcomes rather than difficulties, and flexibility rather than opacity).

## PRAGUE COMMUNIQUÉ [4]

European Ministers in charge of higher education, representing 32 signatories, met in Prague on 19<sup>th</sup> may 2001. The meeting ended with the signing of a Communiqué entitled Towards the European Higher Education Area. Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the objective of establishing the European Higher Education Area by 2010. The Ministers recognised the six objectives from the Bologna Declaration, approved the next activities and added three new objectives:

- Lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. Lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life.
- Higher education institutions and students - the involvement of universities and other higher education institutions and of students as competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed.
- Enhancing attractiveness of European higher education to students from Europe and other parts of the world. Together with the higher education expansion a market for higher education services with all elements – competition, quality and price. This enforce the ministers to take action so that to enhance the attractiveness of EHEA throughout the world.

## BERLIN COMMUNIQUÉ [5]

The next meeting of the European Ministers of Education took place in Berlin on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2003. This meeting reaffirmed the objectives of the Bologna process, accepted in the declarations from Bologna and Prague, rearranged some of them and added three new:

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- European Higher Education Area and European Research Area

- two pillars of the knowledge based society. The Doctor degree must become identification mark of the EHEA;

- Stocktaking - with a view to the goals set for 2010, it is expected that measures will be introduced to take stock of progress achieved in the Bologna Process. The results will be presented at the next ministers meeting in 2005. In this way the stocktaking exercise will provide the possibility to take corrective measures, if appropriate.

The Quality Assurance is the first priority in the Berlin Communiqué. The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area. The quality assurance system has to develop at institutional, national and European level. It is necessary to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance. The primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each autonomous higher education institution itself.

With the view to introducing the two-cycle system the Berlin communiqué report that a comprehensive restructuring of the European landscape of higher education is now under way. All participants in the Bologna process are convinced to having started the implementation of the two-cycle system by 2005.

The member-states are encouraged to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competencies and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.

In the planned stocktaking process are included the next priorities: quality assurance, two-cycle system and comparable and compatible qualification degrees.

#### EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND BOLOGNA PROCESS

The European Commission launched ten concrete measures to help the nine objectives from the Bologna and Prague Declarations and supported by Socrates programme. Some of them are:

- A wide-scale introduction of the Diploma Supplement, increasing substantially the understanding and recognition of degrees at all levels.
- A broad pilot scheme to test a European Credit Accumulation System builds on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) experience.
- The Socrates-Erasmus Student Charter - a one page leaflet or card stating clearly the rights and obligations of mobile students.
- The creation of models of European Virtual Universities.
- A special action to promote a "quality culture" within universities. This pilot scheme would help universities to introduce internal quality assurance mechanisms;
- A Pilot Scheme on European higher education quality evaluation in order to experience what European transnational evaluation would mean;

- Define and support European (joint) Masters and Doctoral Courses.

European University Association started project entitled "Developing an internal quality culture in European universities" known as Quality Culture Project [6], financed by Socrates programme with the participation of many universities throughout Europe including universities from countries, which do not participate in the Socrates programme. In the Berlin communiqué also is stressed on the internal (university) quality assurance systems as the most important element of the whole quality assurance system in higher education.

#### PROBLEMS IN THE CREATION OF EHEA

The Bologna Process is not carrying out smoothly in all national higher education systems. Some of the elements of EHEA contradict to the national traditions in organising and realising of the higher education. The two-cycle system is not at all widespread in the European countries with one exception – United Kingdom. External and internal quality evaluation couldn't be considered as a long time practice in the European countries. Higher education expansion contradicts the elite character of many European Universities. The globalisation makes the educational institutions accessible throughout the world, that why the competition becomes important part of EU higher education policy. Creation of knowledge based society means in great extent that the higher education converts in service and in this way could be inserted in the General Agreement for Trade and Services (GATS). The country-members in the Bologna process are divided regarding the higher education transformation into service and in this way its commercialisation. It is noticed that some countries from northern part of Europe tend to accept commercialisation process and some countries mainly from southern part of Europe continue to insist that the higher education is a public good and as such it couldn't be subject of commercialisation. On the other hand in the Graz Declaration "Forward from Berlin: the role of universities", adopted at a meeting organised by the European University Association, very clear is written that the higher education is first and the most important public responsibility.

The world trends towards higher education expansion, decrease of the public expenditure for higher education and competition for attracting more students bring to behaviour change of the autonomous universities in their aspiration for developing and quality increasing.

The results from a study of the Bologna process, done by S. Reichert and C. Tauch [7], entitled Progress towards the European Higher Education Area (Trends III) are showing clear aspiration of the country-participants in the Bologna process to establish and participate in the EHEA. It is also clear the differences in the approach, achievements and eagerness of the country and higher education institutions. Very clear are shown the differences in the adoption of Bologna process objectives between the academic and administrative staff and the students from one hand and the institution managing bodies from the other hand. Reforms are difficult to be carried out in autonomous institutions with elected managers – they

easily become hostages of their voters, which are in great extent affected from the reforms.

Next results cited in the study are giving a good idea for the passing status of the one of the most important objective – implementation of the two-cycle system (bachelor/master-doctor). 80% of the countries-participants in the Bologna process are having the legal possibility for implementing or at the very moment are implementing this system. In the other 20% of the countries the necessary legal changes for introduction of the two-cycle system are creating now. 53% of the higher education institutions implemented or are implementing the two-cycle system and 36% are planing to do so. Or almost 90% of the higher education institutions in the countries-participants in the Bologna process are implemented or are implementing the two-cycle system. About 55% of the higher education institutions in Southeast Europe are not implemented this system yet.

#### THE BULGARIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AND BOLOGNA PROCESS

In 1995 the Higher Education Act (HEA) was voted by the Bulgarian Parliament [8]. The act introduces a two-cycle system – bachelor/master-doctor. This is a very important element of the higher education system (HES), which afterwards will be a basic element of the reform in many European countries as a part of the Bologna process and creation of the EHEA. In 1999 some amendments were voted in the Parliament with which was given answer to the requirements of the European legislation – Aquis Communautaire and to the good practices in the member-countries. The most important amendment was the abolition the double standard towards the Bulgarian University admission – the so-called “paid education” was abolished. Instead tuition fees were introduced for all students. The tuition fees couldn't be more than 30% of the real education cost in the respective professional field.

Thanks to the HEA amendments introduced it became possible a Chapter 18 “Education and Training” from the negotiations for the EU accession to be closed in 2000.

The two-cycle system was accepted from the Bulgarian universities without specific opposition. The first students with bachelor degree graduated in 2001 and two years later – the first students with master degree appeared.

The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) was established in 1996. The Agency is independent structure established for independent external quality evaluation and quality legitimisation through accreditation procedures. The accreditation is institutional and programme. Education in certain programme is allowed and financed only after the respective programme accreditation. The institutional accreditation precedes the programme accreditation and represents preliminarily condition for budget financing of the state universities.

The Higher Education Act requires every university to establish the Internal Quality Assurance System with which they will realise their responsibility for the quality of the higher education proposed. The external evaluation represents verification of the Internal Quality Assurance System operation. All Bulgarian universities (state and private) passed the first accreditation cycle and now some of them started the second cycle.

In the HEA amendments from 2004 the basic elements of the national credit accumulation system created on basis of the ECTS. The Diploma Supplement as the European Commission defines it is introduced.

The participation in the Socrates programme (Bulgaria is in the programme from 1999) is an important part of the Bologna process. Many of the programme activities are supporting the EHEA establishment.

The reforms undertaken in the last 10 years create the necessary preconditions for Bulgarian higher education system inclusion in the European Higher Education Area.

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# Appendix

## BOLOGNA PROCESS

