


Editorial

Bologna and Beyond?

'Why ever are the Europeans doing this to themselves' asked an American professor recently. He was referring to the Bologna Process, whereby 46 signatory European Ministers offered voluntarily to bring their higher education systems into alignment over a period of 10 years, ending in 2010. This special issue of *LATISS* looks at how the Bologna process came about, and how it works as a new form of governance in Europe, which creates conformity through peer pressure. We then examine two elements of the Bologna process in detail – the standardised degree cycle and the qualifications frameworks. Hopefully, this special issue¹ goes some way to answering the American colleague's question and, at the same time, contributes to a critical assessment of the Bologna process as it nears its target date for completion.

An interview with Ole Henckel plots the pre-history of the Bologna process and traces political developments through to the present. It explains in part why universities voluntarily engaged in the early stages of the process. Committed to what might be called an academic notion of internationalisation – the free exchange of students and staff between universities in the pursuit of personal intellectual development and knowledge for its own sake – the Bologna process offered a way to iron out technical impediments to exchanges within Europe, such as a method of translating and recognising exam grades from a period of study abroad so that they could be incorporated into the students' degree. But, as Ole Henckel makes clear, right from the start there was also another meaning of internationalisation at play, one which may more accurately be called marketisation or globalisation. Emerging through the process, and especially through its conjunction with the European Union's aim



to create a European Higher Education Area, is the aim to establish co-operation and coordination between European universities to create a distinctive, quality-assured brand and a highly attractive product for the trade in international students. In a trade predicted to grow exponentially, Europe is already gaining ground on the market leaders, Australia and the USA.

How has the market meaning taken over from the academic meaning of internationalisation? Ole Henckel points out that the early years of the Bologna process were also marked by a divergence between the stance of university leaders and academic staff. University leaders positioned themselves, through the European Universities Association, to be actively involved in shaping the process from the beginning, and accepted that the game they were playing involved standardisation for marketisation. Students and academics tried to maintain the earlier position, set out in the Magna Charta, that universities are a public good. Whereas the European students' organisation (ESIB) also participated actively in setting the agenda from the start, the academics' organisation, Education International, focused on the World Trade Organisation and negotiations over the General Agreement on Trade in Services in its fight against marketisation and free trade in higher education. The voices of academics were absent from the crucial, early stages of the Bologna process when the agenda was set and when 'internationalisation' came to mean cooperation for competition in a global market for higher education.

If Henckel outlines how the Bologna process exemplifies the style of governance promoted by the European Union, the Open Method of Coordination, Andreas Fejes explores in detail how this soft form of power operates. Taking a Foucaultian approach, he shows how the Bologna process has contributed to a discourse which is both about restructuring higher education in Europe and about introducing a new governmentality. Fejes then shows how the Bologna documents promise participating countries that standardisation and compatibility of their systems can be achieved whilst retaining their originality. The Bologna process merely establishes frameworks; each country is free to work out for themselves how to comply with those frameworks in



their own way, compatible with their own traditions. Homogeneity preserving heterogeneity. Further legitimisation for the Bologna process comes from the claim that countries are ‘free’ to choose whether to participate in this process of homogenisation – but if they do not succumb to peer pressure and join in, they will just end up with an incompatible system and have to drop out of the new great game to capture the global market in higher education. Fejes then shows how the governmentality discourse that he has identified in the Bologna documents ‘travels’ into the Swedish national documents. The Swedish government makes no demands on universities to implement the elements of the Bologna process: they are constructed as active subjects who are free to choose whether to join in the process and to find ways that suit their own particular circumstances and traditions. The only choice universities cannot make is not to choose, as Fejes puts it. Swedish universities have to decide whether to play the game or leave the table. The same governmentality discourse travels via quality audit systems to the individual academic, who is similarly invited to freely participate and calculate how to reach the required standards in their own way – with dire consequences for their career and their department if they ‘choose’ not to participate. Fejes identifies the often invisible ways that power operates through freedom and diversity to create standardisation – in short, to refer back to the question of an American colleague, Fejes shows how (if not yet why) Europeans are doing this to themselves.

What, in fact are the Europeans doing through the Bologna process? In the first 6–7 years, the process has focused on harmonising structures of higher education across Europe to promote the mobility of students and the international recognition of their qualifications by employers. This harmonisation process has focussed on the following elements: a three-cycle structure of degrees – 3-year BA, 2-year MA and 3-year PhD; a qualifications framework to describe each BA and MA using standardised descriptors of learning outcomes, so as to make the degrees compatible across Europe; a diploma supplement for each degree, which accompanies the student’s marks and gives information about the student, the study programme and the

institution; the organisation of degrees in modules with a standardised system of awarding credits towards a degree, which a student can transfer from one university to another; compatible systems of quality assurance, now, increasingly to be achieved through national systems of accrediting degree programmes.

Marte Mangset examines the first of these, the three-cycle degree structure. By 2007, 82 per cent of European higher education institutions reported they had the three-cycle degree structure in place (compared to 53 per cent four years previously) (Redden 2007). It is a truism in the rest of Europe that Britain says it will join in with common processes, but continues to stick to its own, incompatible, ways. The degree structure is a prime example. Just before the Bologna process began defining a common structure (3 + 2 + 3), the British Office for Science and Technology determined that the British structure would be 3 + 1 + 3 and would not budge thereafter. Why are the British so uncooperative? Mangset explores this, focusing on the discipline of history, interviewing in an ancient and a green field university, and analysing national policy documents. She advances two arguments. First, the British had started reforming their degree structure 15 years before Bologna. The expansion of higher education had meant that the BA was no longer sufficient for graduates to mark themselves out in the labour market. There was an increasing demand for a one-year MA from British graduates and also for visiting students from the USA. The MA degree was detached from the PhD process, given a separate status, and turned increasing from a degree by individual and independent research into a taught degree with a small dissertation. Britain had therefore already achieved the reform that Bologna tried to introduce later into the rest of Europe. Second, the reform in Britain was to increase the standard period of higher education (a 3-year BA) by one year. Elsewhere in Europe, the standard period of education was a master's degree, which often took seven years. The Bologna process was therefore attractive to governments elsewhere in Europe as a way of reducing the standard period of education to five or even three years, whereas in Britain it would mean the unattractive and costly increase of the standard period of education from three



to five years. Mangset's historical and ethnographic exploration helps provide a rationale for the apparent uncooperativeness of the British. She ends by pointing out that if the Bologna process really does change European systems to create a strong and unified standard, British universities may well have to come into line.

If Mangset ends by entering a note of doubt about whether the Bologna process will create the intended fundamental rethinking about systems of higher education, this doubt is raised loud and clear by Berit Karseth's study of qualifications frameworks. The latest ministerial meeting concluded, with the tone of a negative school report, that 'initial progress has been made' but 'much more effort is required'. In fact, Karseth reveals that two different frameworks have been developed, based on different descriptors. When she examines how the construction of qualifications frameworks has been pursued in Norway, she finds that these two systems have still not been reconciled, and that several higher education institutions feel that it will not be possible to create one set of descriptors that covers all institutions. It seems the method of creating homogeneity through heterogeneity that Fejes identified, is coming unstuck. Nevertheless, official reports maintain, with touching faith in rational planning, that such obstacles can be overcome by involving all stakeholders in developing strategies towards an implementation process. The different ideas about qualifications frameworks do have one thing in common – there is a focus on achieving pre-determined and measurable learning outcomes that are deemed useful for the labour market. Karseth shows how this approach is based on an instrumental idea of curriculum, which is in keeping with the moves towards a market orientation, but which runs counter to the predominant view in academic literature that the curriculum should be driven by disciplinary content and used to develop critical reflection and social engagement, which are, in essence, unpredictable. Just as Fejes questioned the function of audit, so Karseth's study highlights another aspect of the growth of control systems: 'learning outcomes' are perhaps the prime example of indicators which do not measure or enhance knowledge but which satisfy external requirements for the political control of knowledge.

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If the focus of the Bologna process so far has been on creating a standardised European Higher Education Area, which can promote a mobile and employable workforce and a new form of governance within Europe, then the latest ministerial meeting in London in 2007 concentrated on how to position Europe competitively in relation to a global market in higher education. Unfortunately due to illness, Tor Halvorsen's article on 'Bologna global' could not be completed for this issue, but will, hopefully, be published in a future issue. Tor has traced how the aim to make Europe attractive in a market of fee-paying international students has come into conflict with interests from the South, arguing that the 'external dimension' of the Bologna process should be based on a commitment to overcoming global inequalities in the knowledge economy. Again, the Bologna rhetoric has tried to reconcile the aims of standard setting for global competition with ideas of collaboration for the sake of global concerns. But this seems to be an inversion of discourses identified by Henckel and Fejes about collaboration for competition.

However the European actors tried to square preparations for competition in a globalised trade in higher education with a moral agenda to develop poorer countries through cooperation in the academic sense of internationalisation, the Bologna process has created a dynamic of its own outside Europe. African countries are debating establishing a similar standardisation process in their region, so as to cooperate to retain students, or attract them to regional hubs, in the global competition for this market (Zgaga 2006). They are looking to UNESCO, not the Bologna Process or the European Union, to facilitate this process. Even the USA, with its proud history of diverse kinds of universities and devolved decision making has, under Secretary of Education Spelling's 'Commission on the Future of Higher Education', proposed much more interventionist roles for federal policy making in higher education for the first time. Charged with devising a 'comprehensive national strategy', the Commission argued that the higher education 'industry' is not paying attention to the marketplace and colleges 'will not remain the best in the world if they do not become more efficient, more accessible and more



accountable to parents, students, and taxpayers' (Field 2005). First, the Commission floated proposals for federal testing of college students to assess student standards. When this was successfully resisted, attention turned, for example, to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity which authorises the wide range of universities' accrediting agencies. The Federal Education Department is putting pressure on that organisation to press universities into collecting and publishing systematic information on student outcomes – implicitly setting performance measures, and moving towards more standardised ways of checking the adequacy of curricula and defining quality. The strategy contains the same danger of promoting experts on indicators and downgrading academics' expertise in higher education, as seen in the Bologna Process. While 'Bologna in America' is spreading a contagion of standardisation and quality assurance in an attempt to maintain the position of the American brand in the global market for students, the methods of the Spelling initiatives are quite different from Bologna's new forms of governance. The Spelling approach is explicitly top-down and interventionist, whereas under the Bologna process countries and universities are given the 'choice' of doing it to themselves, such that even in Britain, the President of Universities U.K., can say

One of the great successes of the Bologna Process so far is that, by and large, it has been sector-led...but there is a continual danger...that bureaucratisation actually takes over....What I think we want to keep saying is that the Bologna Process has worked extremely well bottom up, not top-down (Professor Drummond Bone, statement to House of Commons Select Committee report on the Bologna Process, quoted in Shepherd 2007).

Such an interpretation of the Bologna Process as enhancing freedom, choice and autonomy, is, according to the articles in this special issue, to misunderstand how the Open Method of Coordination operates. Hence, it seems strange to an American observer who is faced with clear impositions from above, representing a new level of federal intrusion into university autonomy, that the Europeans choose to do

this to themselves. As the target date for the completion of the Bologna Process nears, there are questions not only about what happens beyond Bologna within Europe, but also beyond Europe, as other continents become infected with new systems of harmonisation and control as they prepare to compete with the Bologna brand.

Note

1. The special issue originates from a conference organised by Tor Halvorsen 'The Bologna Process and the Shaping of the Future Knowledge Societies', the third conference on Knowledge and Politics, University of Bergen, 18–20 May 2005 (Halvorsen and Nyhagen 2005). The authors have written new or substantially revised articles for this special issue.

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