

## **Bologna and ERASMUS+ Charter: From Policy to Practice**

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Dear colleagues,

Exactly twenty years ago the Sorbonne Declaration was signed by the ministers of education of the four largest European countries. It motivated the French to have another Ministerial Conference – now in the context of the Bologna Process – in Paris last week to discuss the progress made in developing one European Higher Education Area.

Those who have been able to study the Paris Communiqué already, which is the result of this meeting, will have notice that the signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration have expressed their satisfaction of what has been established during two decades of policy making. In their wording: ‘We are proud of what the Bologna Process has achieved’. It speaks of agreed goals and policies, shaping the landscape, large scale student mobility, improved comparability and transparency of systems and increased quality and understanding, and mutual trust. Stressed in the text is the dialogue between the political level and the implementation level, that is the Higher Education sector and its institutions. It speaks of defending fundamental values, and of ‘developing policies that encourage and support HE institutions to fulfil their social responsibility and contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive society through enhancing intercultural understanding, civic engagement and ethical awareness, as well as ensuring equitable access to higher education’. This is firm language, which we have not seen in this form in previous communiqués. It suits the present spirit or *Zeitgeist* well.

The ministers show self-critical awareness by stating that progress in implementing the Bologna Process remains uneven, both between policy areas and countries. New is the focus on innovations in teaching and learning and on the required pedagogical training of staff. The text is inspirational and a blue print for innovation and the implementation of additional reforms. As in previous cases the final Communiqué is the outcome of intense debate

between countries and associated members of the Process. If I have counted well, it took eight draft versions to arrive to the final text.

Against the background of the Communiqué, yesterday, a *Peer Learning Activity* (PLA) took place – organized by the Dutch team of the Bologna Experts team in close cooperation with the Dutch National Agency, NUFFIC. It involved experts from nine different countries, besides the Netherlands as organizer, Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and the UK. On behalf of the organizers, I want to thank all those experts for accepting our invitation and for offering their ideas and opinions. Their role: to identify and discuss the connection between policy and reality.

To be more precise, the representatives of these nine countries were asked to link political ambitions and national implementation by focusing on the *ERASMUS Charter for Higher Education* (ECHE) as a means for ‘enhancing’ / ‘stimulating’ reform, in five minute pitches each and to round-off their presentation with a burning question. This proved to be a rather challenging task given the limited timeframe and the complexity of the issues at stake. Many of the speakers had difficulties coming up with a burning question. Did this imply that policies were implemented smoothly all over the nine countries? The opposite seems to be true. The pitches proved to be quite different, reflecting the diversity of the state of affairs in Europe. Some countries have developed policies – even quite recently - in which clear and ambitious targets have been set. Among these the ambition to reach 35 to even 50% student mobility. Other countries proved less ambitious and inspired. What followed was a very lively discussion, which at certain moments became even somewhat emotional which confirmed the personal involvement of the experts present in the topics at stake.

The initiators of the Peer Learning Activity expected some connotation between Bologna and ECHE – the Charter. This relation proved to be rather weak or even non-existent. While Bologna is perceived as a responsibility of governments, the Charter is mainly or completely left to the HE institutions. It had been hoped that the PLA would suggest models that would allow for scaling in other countries (to make a difference). The participants learned a lot from each other, but no actual models were provided.

What was confirmed, was the tension between political ambition and practice. Also the uneven level of implementation was confirmed, by focusing on the three key aims of the Bologna Process: the three-cycle system based on the QF for the EHEA and ECTS, compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and Quality Assurance arrangements according to the European Standards and Guidelines. In all fairness, familiarity among academic staff and students with the Bologna Process and its objectives is low. Institutions and their staffs might think they are doing a good job, while in reality it is not always perceived as such by partners. It takes two to tango. The big question, dubbed the elephant in the room was : what to do with students and institutions who do not play according to the agreed rules?

It is thought crucial to convince staff and students of the importance the Bologna reforms in terms of the relevance and quality of HE programmes, as these have at least partly been partly translated into the ECHE. Winning heart and minds requires serious effort, and is conditional for meeting the aims set. Without commitment of institutions, staff and students there will not be the required basis for successful implementation and enhancement of the internationalization of HE as outlined by the Ministers.

There seem to be at least two ways forward : an active government and/or national quality assurance / accreditation organization that steers the process. An approach which can be perceived as top-down. This may help, but it may also meet opposition. Another possible way forward is a bottom-up approach. The example comes from Italy. A team of Bologna experts consisting of academics, which is highly trusted by stakeholders, initiated successful cooperation between universities, associations and the like and offered (and still offers) highly appreciated support by developing instructions and guidelines. At present, the Italian team works on a common (national) format for the course catalogue. A comparable initiative may be taken in the Netherlands, with support of SURF. Naturally, one can also imagine a combination of a top-down and bottom-up approach to enhance internationalization.

Applying the instruments well that have been developed, such as ECTS (course catalogue, learning agreement, Transcript of Records, credit and grade recognition and conversion) and

the Diploma Supplement will also enhance internationalization. Good instructions in the national language are perceived as crucial here. Examples of good practice in this respect have been developed in Austria, Italy and the Netherlands, for instance. Standardization in terms of format and use are thought to be helpful.

It seems fair to conclude on the basis of the pitches, that having teams of Bologna experts makes a real difference. Austria is an excellent example. In that country, in recent years, real dynamism has developed again in enhancing reform as a result of an active team. In conjunction, also active National Agencies can make a real difference.

It is noted, with regret, that the majority of EU countries no longer has a Bologna Experts team. There is irony here, because the European Commission has set up a support mechanism called *Support and Promotion for Higher Education Reform Experts* (SPHERE) for neighbouring countries, while the EU countries lack such a supporting structure to assist in the implementing of Bologna. To avoid any misunderstandings, it were the EU countries themselves that decided not to apply for EU support anymore. This hurts those countries, but also partner countries and their institutions. Coordinated change and enhancement of internationalization requires appropriate structures.

In general, it is stipulated that mobility has substantially increased, the number of international degree students has grown and the quality and feasibility of programmes have been improved in recent decades. A serious challenge has been the introduction of the student-centred approach and the introduction of learning outcomes as a means to define learning. This paradigm change has proven to be a serious hurdle to take and it has not been implemented yet in the majority of institutions. This paradigm change also implies more flexibility which allows – even promotes – mobility and internationalization.

It is advisable to offer part of the teaching staff a more visible and responsible role in the internationalization process (comparable to that in the International Cooperation Projects - ICPs) in the 1980s and 1990s). The focus at present is probably too much on marketing and far less on the value and contribution of degree programmes.

Finally, the experts think the key to success is the direct involvement of the management of HE institutions in any reform and enhancement process. They are pivotal in realizing change. A committed management board should be able to inspire staff and students, and to promote and implement reform. It is also in the position to obtain more political support and if required additional financial support, for example to facilitate staff development. Politicians and civil servants should understand that policymaking is not for free. An actual transfer of the political ambitions of the Paris Communiqué into day-to-day practice should show us, in the years to come, that the emphasis on the involvement of the HE sector, its staffs and students in the Bologna Process is really taken seriously this time.

Thank you for your attention. And I thank my Dutch colleagues for their support in drawing up this report.