Ten years of Bologna: what has changed for learners?

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Abstract

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The Bologna process sets its 47 signatory countries some ambitious objectives that have far reaching consequences for higher education. Yet to date an encompassing assessment has not been made of the extent to which the objectives have been implemented, still less their impact on students and learners. This paper makes an initial attempt to fill this gap. It draws on the results of a major study commissioned by the European Commission (Westerheijden et al, 2010) which sought to examine the changes achieved so far in a range of areas addressed by Bologna (although the views expressed in this paper are exclusively those of the authors alone, and not of the European Commission). It reinterprets the findings from the perspective of the (potential) effects on students. As will be shown, very little is known about these effects, but the approach generates important questions about the changes that are taking place that form the basis for an agenda for future research.
Presentation

Ten years of Bologna: what has changed for learners?

Introduction

The Bologna process sets its 47 signatory countries some ambitious objectives that have far reaching consequences for higher education. Yet to date an encompassing assessment has not been made of the extent to which the objectives have been implemented, still less their impact on students and learners. This paper makes an initial attempt to fill this gap. It draws on the results of a major study commissioned by the European Commission (Westerheijden et al, 2010) which sought to examine the changes achieved so far in a range of areas addressed by Bologna (although the views expressed in this paper are exclusively those of the authors alone, and not of the European Commission). It reinterprets the findings from the perspective of the (potential) effects on students. As will be shown, very little is known about these effects, but the approach generates important questions about the changes that are taking place that form the basis for an agenda for future research.

The intended effects of Bologna on students and learners

In order to assess the effects of Bologna, it is important to scope the intended effects on students and learners. To do this, it is helpful to set up a framework based on the goals of Bologna and to trace the causal connections from objectives to action through to intended outcomes. This is not a straightforward process since it cannot simply be ‘read off’ from official documentation without some interpretation, as Bologna involves a complex set of objectives and actions which are inter-related one with another and which have tended to grow and develop over time. For these reasons, establishing an ‘intervention logic’ requires some imputing of the relationships between the different elements of the schema.

Figure 1 presents the goals of the Bologna process as a hierarchy of objectives. This is a composite picture of Bologna as it stands today. It is in the nature of Bologna that it can respond to emerging needs and it has accreted objectives and instruments during its first decade, a notably more recent addition being the goals relating to equity. A consequence of this process is that we can identify at least 12 separate sets of measures. These have been placed beneath the operational objectives to which they are most closely related. But again, it is a feature of Bologna that each instrument typically contributes to several objectives. Finally, it is worth noting that Bologna encompasses both structural measures like the 3-cycle degree structure and the European credit transfer system (ECTS) (which have been adopted as quasi-mandatory core elements of Bologna participation by national governments) and other measures whose widespread adoption depends on the development and spread of good practice, incentives, national reform agendas, etc, such as recognition of prior learning and the development of mobility support measures.
**Figure 1: Hierarchy of objectives and measures in the Bologna process**

**General objectives**

Creation of a EHEA that is attractive, competitive and equitable and with a high level of (international) mobility of students, researchers and staff

**Specific objectives**

To establish compatible and comparable HE  
To enhance quality in European HE  
To develop more flexible and accessible HE that is open to all and supports lifelong learning

**Operational objectives**

To improve recognition of programmes and qualifications  
To increase cooperation in QA and improve comparability of criteria and methods  
To improve the flexibility of learning pathways and establish student-centred learning  
To implement mechanisms to improve take-up of HE by under-represented groups

**Measures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mobility support packages*</th>
<th>3-cycle degree structure</th>
<th>DS</th>
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**Legend:** HE = higher education; QA = quality assurance; QF = qualifications framework; ECTS = European credit transfer system; DS = diploma supplement; RPL = recognition of prior learning.

* Mobility support packages were identified as important in the London and Leuven Communiqués, linked to the increasing emphasis being placed on action at institutional level (in contrast to the stress hitherto on European and national frameworks). The study on which this paper draws, however, did not gather data at this level, and so we do not cover it in detail in this paper.

In relation to the intended effects of these actions on students, a reading of the official documentation highlights two things. First, it shows that student effects in particular are not articulated in a very coherent or comprehensive way but rather tend to be scattered across the official communiqués or implied within them. In the Bologna Declaration itself, the word ‘student(s)’ appears only twice. The most substantive setting out of benefits is in relation to international mobility which occurs in the Leuven Communiqué which notes that:

‘Mobility is important for personal development and employability, it fosters respect for diversity and a capacity to deal with other cultures. It encourages linguistic pluralism, thus underpinning the multilingual tradition of the European Higher Education Area...’ (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009, paragraph 18).

Even here, however, the effects are hardly treated in great depth.

Secondly, it is notable throughout the communiqués that, where effects are actually identified, this tends to be in the context of international mobility rather than other objectives, which do not necessarily entail cross-border mobility as an outcome, i.e. quality, the development of flexible learning pathways, and the improvement in access to HE.

As with objectives, it has therefore been necessary to gather together the effects on students from across the official documents and, here and there, to impute an effect by logical extension. In doing so, it is useful to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative effects. Qualitatively, the following intended effects can be identified, flowing especially from mobility (identifying instances where the effect has been explicitly cited in the official documentation in parenthesis):
Qualitative effects on students

- improving personal development (London and Leuven), including the ability to take responsibility for one’s own learning which flows from more flexible pathways and a student-centred approach
- enhanced employability competences (Sorbonne, Berlin, Leuven) and preparing them for their future careers (London)
- increasing levels of ‘active citizenship’ (citizens playing an active role in democratic societies) (Berlin, Bergen, London, Leuven)
- enhanced sense of European identity (Berlin)
- fostering respect for diversity and a capacity to deal with other cultures (Leuven)
- improved linguistic skills (Leuven).

Quantitative (volume) effects on students

- increased movement of students into the EHEA from outside on account of its increased attractiveness
- increased movement of students within the EHEA
- more students in higher quality (accredited) HE
- more students on flexible learning pathways
- a student population which better represents the spread of the general population across different social groups.

Looking at both the objectives and their intended effects on students, three observations can be made:

First, Bologna is designed to have its principal or first order effects on higher education at systems level, by which we mean systems at European, national and institutional levels. It is intended that beneficial effects on students will flow from these wider changes, some explicitly and directly, some rather more indirectly and implicitly.

Secondly, while the objectives all relate to students and clearly their achievement would have effects on students, they have not been formulated with the student as the main target explicitly in mind. Therefore the relationships between the operational objectives and their intended effects on students remain unclear and would have to be imputed. For these reasons, whilst the framework of objectives and effects provides a logical and useful starting point for a consideration of student effects, the effects on students from the above list are not systematically used in the main part of our analysis below.

Thirdly, tracing the effects through to individual students is fraught with difficulty since by the time ‘an effect’ reaches ‘a student’ a considerable set of contextual factors (including institutional factors and national policy) will have been met along the way. The extent to which any changes are due to Bologna is thus a moot point, and often irrelevant from the point of view of the student experience. Bologna has captured a number of emerging trends and has helped to shape them (Witte 2006:3; 464-465), and it is more important to consider what is happening and how Bologna might perhaps respond going forwards.

In the next sections of the paper, we structure our analysis around the four operational objectives (compatibility and recognition, quality assurance, flexible pathways and accessibility of HE - see Figure 1) plus the issue of international mobility, always focusing on the effects on students.

International mobility is included here since it has always been at the heart of Bologna, featuring prominently in the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration. To reflect this position we have included it in the process’s general objectives in Figure 1. It is also one of the major avenues through which the EHEA
becomes a reality for students, and some relatively reliable – if basic – mobility data is available for analysis.

**International mobility**

International mobility takes two spatial forms and comes in two types. Spatially, we need to distinguish between: (a) movements into the EHEA from outside which is linked to making the EHEA an attractive place for study and research; and (b) mobility between countries within the EHEA, where it has a positive effect for individuals and for European growth and cohesion. In terms of types, we should distinguish (i) full ‘degree’ mobility from (ii) ‘credit’ mobility where students take only part of their course in another country.

A number of major shifts took place over the period from 1999 to 2007 (all figures in this section are from Westerheijden et al, 2010, section 7.2, which is based on UNESCO data):

- A significant rise in degree mobility: the number of foreign students completing a full degree in the EHEA increased by 74%, outstripping the overall student growth rate of 33%. Questions arise as to whether HE systems have responded adequately to these increases in terms of the support available to students from other countries.

- A much faster rise of degree mobility into the EHEA from outside than within the EHEA, such that the non-EHEA students now account for 2.6% of all students, compared to the foreign EHEA student share of 2.0% (in 1999 the shares were 1.6% and 1.9% respectively). This raises interesting questions about both the orientation of individual institutions, and of national bodies with respect to foreign students, and especially about the extent to which they are specifically EHEA-oriented or have a global focus (and are ‘EHEA blind’). It is important to consider the motivations for why governments and institutions seek foreign students, the measures put in place to support mobility, and their effects on students.

- Overwhelmingly, Western European countries have been the main beneficiaries of the growth in non-EHEA students entering for degree mobility. Fourteen of the 15 countries above the total EHEA growth rate of 63% are from this group. There remains a very large group of countries where the foreign student body is low and decreasing, which raises questions about the potential quality of these students’ experience (as well as whether the concept of an EHEA is relevant in this context since some countries are clearly being preferred over others and many countries and institutions are using their own branding and marketing policies to attract foreign students – wherever they may come from.)

- As far as degree mobility within the EHEA is concerned, there is still enormous variation from country to country. Western European dominance is less prominent: only 16 out of the 29 countries above the EHEA growth rate of 4.1% are from this group. Nonetheless, there is a large group of countries in mainly Eastern and Central Europe that are minor destinations and there are few reasons to think they will increase their attraction for students. Some countries have seen a fall in numbers. Overall, there seems to have been a widening of the East-West divide.

- Furthermore, some of the countries that are large recipients of students send few students, notably the UK. Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK have seen falling levels of outgoing mobility to EHEA countries. Important questions need to be asked about the geographical unevenness in patterns of mobility, in particular whether they are due to lack of opportunities, a preference for destinations outside the EHEA, or factors that inhibit opportunities being taken up.
In relation to credit mobility, only within-EHEA data are available—and only partially even there. Data from the Erasmus programme indicates that growth in student numbers since 1999 has been due to new countries. Besides, an East-West pattern remains. Data from the Eurostudent survey (Orr, Schnitzer & Frackmann, 2008) available for 20 countries shows that in half of them the proportion of students with a study-abroad experience in 2008 was less than 10%, in seven between 10 and 15% and only in three (Norway, Germany and Finland) greater than 15%. Most countries not participating in the survey are likely to have lower rates.

**Quality assurance**

Most countries had introduced forms of QA in the 1980s and 1990s. Bologna has attempted to ensure greater comparability between the systems in use, leading to agreed standards and procedures in 2003 (the ‘European standards and guidelines.’) and the introduction of a European register of quality assurance agencies in 2005. Participation of learners in QA systems is now common. All countries bar one now apply internal and external QA on a system-wide scale; but not all HEIs have their own QA processes (Westerheijden et al, 2010, Vol 2 Case studies and appendices).

Within some countries, history and national policy played significant roles in shaping QA as a top-down process. This approach does not guarantee effective engagement by HEIs – or of academics and students – in the development of quality cultures. The discipline-based approach pioneered by Tuning may offer a useful, more bottom-up and more content-driven, counterweight.

In terms of their effect on students, it is difficult to gauge the impact of QA measures because the chain of causal links from national QA systems to the improvement of the student experience in an individual programme is long and indirect. Also, it is difficult to look at QA in isolation of other instruments since they are so strongly inter-connected. Clearly improvements in HE quality, especially the change towards learning-outcome oriented education, should have profound effects on students' experiences, but there is no evidence in this regard at this point, partly because the qualifications frameworks mostly still need to become effective in curricula.

**Compatibility, comparability and recognition**

**Development of the 3-cycle degree structure**

Prior to Bologna, there was considerable variation across Europe in the structure of degrees (for reasons of simplicity, we shall not consider the third cycle (doctorate) here). Although 30 systems had a two-cycle structure (involving the first two degree levels, Bachelor and Master) before 1999, these were not necessarily 'Bologna-type' structures; and 18 systems did not have a two-cycle structure. Today, all HE systems in the EHEA have some form of two-cycle structure. In other words, over a third of countries have put in place completely new structures, whilst the remaining two thirds have been going through various degrees and types of reform since 1999. Overall, this part of the Bologna reform package constitutes a major shift in the overall structure of HE for students within the last ten years.

Bologna has never been prescriptive as to the precise form of the two-cycle structure. Consequently, there is variation across countries in the most common approaches used, and also much within-system variation. Indeed, the most common national pattern, in 20 countries, is to allow various combinations of credits for first and second degrees. Nineteen countries report 180+120 (or 3+2 years) to be most common, whilst the remaining seven report 240 credits for the first degree, followed by various credits for the second. But even in these countries there are significant variations from subject to subject. The scale of these variations on students has not been mapped and their
effects little understood.

However, to the extent that recognition practices are still mostly based on length of full-time study rather than on 'nominal' degrees, let alone competence development/learning outcomes, there is likely to be an important degree of inequality introduced depending on a student’s country of origin. Nonetheless, the current position would seem to represent progress from the situation where, pre-Bologna, it could be difficult for students travelling from systems with long first-cycle degrees located at Master's level to have their qualifications recognised as more than Bachelor's level in countries with two-cycle systems (a difficulty for movement from Europe to the US for example); and for US students for instance to enter European institutions without two cycles as graduates.

ECTS

As far as curriculum reforms are concerned, it is clear that, prior to Bologna, the ECTS was used to only a highly limited degree as a transfer instrument for international student exchange, and not more broadly as a tool for opening up flexibilities and making HE more student-centred. Debates on curriculum reform and the role of learner-centredness, flexibility, and modularisation of curricula varied across Europe; and generally were only in progress in a few countries, e.g. the UK.

As far as ECTS is concerned, all HE systems now either make use of it, or a comparable system in broad scale, or are in transition towards it. However, six systems use it in less than 75% of non-doctoral programmes, which raises questions about the ability of students to transfer between courses. Further, only 12 systems use both student workload and learning outcomes as the basis for credit allocation, as recommended in the EC ECTS Users’ Guide. Twenty-two systems use only one or the other; and 13 use neither. Also, the understanding of modularisation, that often goes hand-in-hand with the use of ECTS, and particularly of suitable module sizes varies significantly, with potentially harmful effects on intra- and international mobility (where modules are large or have incompatible sizes) (see section on flexible pathways). Where ECTS has reached high levels of implementation, the debate has shifted to the way the system is implemented. The question of whether student workload or learning outcomes should take primacy in the definition of a credit is currently a major concern, along with ensuring that, whatever methods are used at national and institutional levels, that they articulate with European frameworks in a way that serves to ensure recognition and support mobility between HE systems. The use of learning outcomes has the potential to make HE more transparent for learners and employers, and also renders the whole process of recording achievement (e.g. in the DS) easier.

Qualifications frameworks

Qualifications frameworks (QFs) became an action line in the Bologna process from 2003 onwards, and are at the crossroads of degree structures, quality assurance, recognition and the social dimension. Thus far, eight HE systems have self-certified their national qualification frameworks, mapping them onto the EHEA meta-framework. Prior to Bologna, QFs in terms of learning outcomes and graduate competences were hardly heard of, but are now becoming common currency. That said, the major step now is to adapt curricula to focus on agreed learning outcomes. The extent of adaptation and its effect on students is minimal to date; most countries have until 2012 to develop their national frameworks and curricula are expected to be adapted only after that point in time.

Countries appear to be showing a slight preference for assisting HEIs by developing sectoral frameworks (based for instance on the descriptors of the Tuning project). However, evidence from elsewhere (Allais, 2007; Blackmur, 2004) suggests that such approaches can lead to highly detailed prescriptions and superficial compliance by HEIs. Formal descriptions may prevail over actual implementation (Rauhvargers et al 2009), with few beneficial changes for the learner. Curricula and
Qualifications are highly context-dependent, the context being provided by the HE system and the wider social and economic contexts within which they are embedded. Qualifications mapping and curriculum reform are not simply technical matters, but drive at the heart of what HE is for, both in general and for individual programmes and individual students. These aspects require detailed investigation. Evidence indicates that the one of the most critical success factors are the commitment of academics, and curriculum development and quality staff in HE. Whilst European and national instruments and policies are setting the broad frameworks for action, an individual student's experience will depend considerably on the interpretation and implementation of these frameworks at other levels: sectoral, institutional and programme. Trust is required at multiple levels. The value attached to qualifications across institutions and countries will ultimately play a defining role in whether students benefit from reforms.

**Diploma Supplement**

The implementation of the Diploma Supplement was planned to be completed by 2005, being issued to all graduates automatically, free of charge and in a widely spoken European language. This takes place in most institutions in 30 countries. Formal, legal implementation has however not always been accompanied by real action. Awareness of the DS and its role needs to be improved amongst students and employers.

**Flexible pathways**

Tools like the ECTS and QFs in themselves do not necessarily make for the introduction of more flexible pathways, but they open up the possibility by making it possible to map programmes onto a common framework and to establish equivalencies between degrees and parts of programmes. The extent to which the potential for flexibility is used however depends on how such tools are interpreted and implemented. Somewhat in contrast to these instruments, the development of recognition of prior learning (RPL), short-cycle studies, and modules and electives might be said to constitute more active interventions in the pursuit of greater flexibility. What has been the progress with these measures?

Although there are difficulties with assessing progress, the number of countries with little or no use of RPL instruments (28) considerably outnumbers those where RPL is either nationally established or in widespread use at institutional level (16). Furthermore, even in those countries where RPL is said to be nationally established (14), there is likely to be marked variation in the extent of application in practice. Data on 21 systems indicate that the highest % of students entering HE via RPL is in England, Wales and Northern Ireland where it stands at 15%. The 16 countries with the most widespread use of RPL are in Western Europe plus Slovenia.

Short-cycle studies are recognised as important within the QF-EHEA but their function is left to national/institutional determination. Their definition is therefore problematic (can we be sure we are comparing like with like?), and one cannot say that they are clearly pushed by Bologna, but it appears that they exist in 26 systems, and in some countries account for important shares of students (15%+ in eight systems, 5%+ in 12). They currently have a key role to play in labour market responses to changing employer needs (McCoshan et al, 2008), and so the extent of this variation raises interesting questions about their role and their accommodation within reformed systems.

In respect of modularisation and the use of electives, only 13 systems have 90%+ of study programmes been modularised, and there is no shared understanding of the concept across Europe as tool for flexibility, transferability and mobility. Seven countries have no modular structure, 14 have only initiated it and do not yet have a general structure or clear implementation path; another 13 are going through implementation. We need to understand more about the nature of
modularisation and its potential effects on students and learners. Conceptualisations of modularisation vary substantially from 'breaking programmes into small parts' through 'combining courses into larger units' or 'introducing tracks' to 'introducing continuous assessment.'

Currently, only 21 systems typically have 25% or more of electives in a degree programme which is low given the goals in relation to learner-centeredness and flexibility. Figures need to be treated cautiously since these are rough national estimates of averages; moreover they do not distinguish between 'complete' and 'bounded' electives.

Nonetheless, there has been a significant shift in the landscape, and there is today a common European discourse on curriculum reform, with, as noted above, the emergence of the idea of student-centeredness being a notable feature of the development of Bologna. In many cases, this is having profound effects on learners. The extent to which modularisation, the use of electives and the ECTS have actually facilitated student mobility and flexibility in individual study paths has been impossible to determine to date.

**Developing more accessible HE**

Thirty-nine of 48 systems report under-representation of certain groups in their student body, most typically people from lower socio-economic backgrounds defined by low income and low level of parental educational attainment. Women tend to dominate overall in HE systems but are under-represented in science and technology and second and third degree cycles. As far as it is possible to tell from available data in certain countries, there appears to have been little change in the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE.

The development of more accessible HE involves the creation of more flexible routes into HE (dealt with above) and also the provision of assistance to students who do not have the traditional student profile. This can take the form of (a) adaptations to the way curricula are delivered (through modules and through novel times and places of delivery) and (b) student services and financial support.

Overall, there is still much scope to improve provision for under-represented groups across the EHEA:

- Less than a half of HE systems currently systematically offer one or more of the following modes of learning: part-time, non-traditional times like weekends and evenings or distance education. And, as shown above, the targeted use of modularisation, electives and short-cycle degrees for improving student flexibility is still in its infancy. Further, it is not possible to say to what extent these measures were introduced explicitly to tackle the issue of under-representation or for more general purposes. Two points arise from this: (i) given the nature of the obstacles under-represented groups face, it is unlikely that flexible pathways alone will be sufficient to raise participation since it involves overcoming strong countervailing social and economic factors, sometimes including prejudice and discrimination; (ii) therefore, without specific targeting, these instruments and opportunities are most likely to be used by students who would be likely to enter HE anyway.

- Overall, the development of student guidance and counselling services across the EHEA is highly variable and in most cases limited. In less than one half of systems could provision of reasonable quality be said to be widespread; one fifth of systems do not offer any kind of service. Most systems therefore make some provision either at national or institutional levels but quality and availability are highly variable.

- There is wide variety in the provision of financial aid to students. Six countries make the most positive combination of provision: high direct financial aid, low student payments to HE
institutions and a high share of GDO invested in HE. Six countries sit at the opposite end of this spectrum. The rest fall in between. In 33 systems levels of financial aid are very low.

Overall, then, provision that might help to improve access and participation is highly variable and not widespread in the EHEA. To the extent that the chances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds getting into HE are a function of system flexibilities and the availability of effective packages of support services, opportunities available will be highly dependent on where students live or study. Furthermore, perhaps with the exception of RPL, this provision is as likely to be directed at – and used by – the general student body as the disadvantaged. Taken together, these factors mean that direct support for under-represented groups is likely to be part of provision that in most systems is neither comprehensive nor widespread, and that the propensity of those most in need of it to access even limited provision tends to be low.

Evidence from countries with well-developed educational equity policies also indicates that tackling the question requires sustained effort over a substantial period of time. We would thus not expect recent interventions to register effects on students for some time to come. In Stocktaking 2009, 12 systems left the social dimension section completely or mostly blank, an illustration of the extent of the task ahead in some countries.

Reflections for future data gathering and research

General observations

Re-assessing the material we gathered for the Bologna assessment in terms of effects on students, one of the most striking features to emerge is the enormous diversity in student experiences that there has been over the last ten years. Some countries and institutions have had much farther to travel than others in attempting to bring their systems into line – and indeed to keep up – with the fast developing agenda which has come together through the Bologna process. To take one example, the introduction of the three-cycle degree structure has been – and continues to be – a major upheaval in some countries, whilst in others the structure was already in place. The same holds for modularisation and student-centred curriculum planning more generally. As far as students are concerned, the effect of Bologna has been much more significant for some than others. But the precise nature and magnitude depends on a vast range of factors, including country, institution, programme of study and student background, to cite just four possible variables.

At the same time, available data is inadequate to help us to differentiate between formal change and real changes to the experience of students on the ground. From the data gathering that has happened as part of or accompanying the Bologna process, we have learned much more about formal changes (i.e. legal changes and changes in national policies) than about real changes in student experience. There is much evidence that in many areas there is quite a gap between the adoption of legal frameworks nationally and implementation within higher education institutions. Generally, we need to understand more about such gaps if we are to gauge the impact of Bologna on students.

In the following sections, we look in more detail at the questions arising in relation to the five broad areas discussed in the main part of the paper.

International mobility:

While mobility is one of the areas about which we know relatively much at student level, the general observation also holds that we have no systematic data gathering for the whole of the EHEA. The data we have at hand is either for the EU (and countries connected to them through cooperation
programmes only) or it is world-wide data which is based on very uneven national reporting systems. Also, much data is patchy, e.g. only for programme mobility within ERASMUS, not covering the free movers etc.

Nonetheless, what is clear from the data we have is that, in spite of all the ‘fuss about mobility’ as part of the Bologna discussions, so far only a tiny percentage of students in the EHEA benefits directly from the mobility experience. Furthermore, evidence from elsewhere, e.g. Erasmus (Souto Otero and McCoshan, 2006) suggests that mobility is unlikely to be equitably distributed across the student population, but this hypothesis needs testing, again on the basis of reliable data.

Beyond the purely factual data that would need to be systematically collected, more needs to be understood about how students actually make their mobility decisions, not least in order to understand the large geographical unevenness in patterns of mobility, and to provide a context for interpreting the effects of mobility. We need to understand the extent to which mobility choices are constrained by lack of opportunities, or are a function of destination preference, and the nature of the factors that inhibit opportunities being taken up.

We also need to understand the quality of students’ mobility experiences and the extent to which study periods abroad are being recognised, neither of which issue is currently being examined. How does the student experience vary from country to country and institution to institution? Is it affected by the scale of mobility – are students taking their mobility period in minor destination countries/institutions relatively disadvantaged as they are less ‘geared up’ to catering for their needs? Are students in destinations that have seen major growth suffering or benefiting from the rate of change: have countries/institutions responded adequately to the sharp rise in numbers?

**Quality assurance:**

Quality assurance is an area in which the causal links between national (and institutional) policies and the ultimate student experience are particularly convoluted and indirect. If the linkages between quality assurance and quality *per se* are disputed, this also holds for the linkages between programme quality and the student experience. So even if the existence of policies and procedures in line with the European standards and guidelines are in place and have been approved, it cannot be taken for granted that the student experience is better than in a country, institution or programme without them. This does not mean that the efforts to introduce and improve national QA systems should be given up, but that they need to be accompanied with more direct, hands-on measures that target the student experience, such as regular programme reviews, student and graduate surveys at course, programme and institutional levels, drop-out statistics, support programmes for students at risk etc.

One would need to think carefully about the use and scope of EHEA-wide data collection in this field, as much of the data collected here is needed and used immediately at grassroots level to actually improve the student experience.

**Compatibility, comparability and recognition:**

If the effect of introducing three-cycle structures, ECTS, qualifications frameworks, and the diploma supplement on actually improving compatibility, comparability and recognition is unclear, this holds even more so for the effect on students.

Among them, the three-cycle structure is probably the most disputed. While these structures have been implemented with compatibility and flexibility in mind, they constitute the new reality for all students, also for those who have never dreamt of becoming mobile. In systems which previously had long, integrated first degrees, the extent to which the shorter first degree is seen as an improvement
by students depends a lot on labour market opportunities and access to the second cycle. It would be most interesting to have EHEA-wide data on actual student preferences in this field, not least to check if Adelman’s (2009) thesis is correct that Bologna will render the Master degree the dominant degree level throughout Europe or if students’ preferences will be for entering the labour market with a first degree – and to see how flexible systems have really become.

Similar questions could be asked for ECTS: While implementation in an administrative sense is close to universal, the benefits to students depend a lot on how the ECTS is put into practice, about which we know too little: Is ECTS actually rendering curricula more flexible as supposed? How are different course and module sizes dealt with in recognition practice? What are the effects of basing credits on different combinations of student workloads and learning outcomes? Is there a need for complementing ECTS with level indicators as done in some English credit networks?

The effect of Bologna-type qualifications frameworks on students depends on the national interpretations and uses of the new frameworks. Here it is probably less important whether students have heard about the concept of “qualifications frameworks” than how their learning experience will actually change through their use – something particularly hard to assess except for in-depth peer review and time series of in-depth student surveys.

The diploma supplement is probably the least disputed among the measures in this field: while its usefulness might be improved (see e.g. the proposals in Adelman 2009), it cannot do much harm. Here, it would be interesting to learn how beneficial students actually judge the DS and how many of them actually have made use of it so far, and for which purposes.

Flexible pathways:

This area suffers from the unclear conceptualisation (what is actually meant by ‘flexible pathways’?), which makes it unclear which measures countries should actually take to achieve the operational objective, and the causal linkages between these measures and the objective. For lack of better proxies, we have taken modularisation, the use of electives and ECTS as indicators of flexible pathways but as said above, it is not self-evident that the use of these instruments actually renders student pathways more flexible. In this field it would be highly supportive of future policy development and targeting to better define the instruments needed to achieve it and then actually to assess which percentages of students are already benefiting from such instruments and using the pathways. Unconventional access policies, recognition of prior learning, generous recognition practices in general, better linkages between vocational and higher learning, to list a few, would probably belong to the list of instruments in this fields as much as the ones named above.

But to stay with the features covered in our study: what are the types of RPL being put into practice with what advantages and disadvantages for different types of students? Rates of access being achieved through RPL need regular monitoring. Further, to what extent have modularisation, the use of electives and the ECTS actually facilitated student mobility and flexibility in individual study paths? This will depend so much on the actual implementation of these instruments that asking the general question will not generate useful results. This holds similarly for the question: to what extent are modules and electives popular with students when introduced? Also, evidence from elsewhere (McCoshan et al, 2008) suggests that there can be considerable inertia within systems when reforms to pathways are introduced since the social and economic value attached to the new programmes and associated qualifications is unclear. Probably it would make more sense to ask students how flexible they have experienced their study paths and what they see as obstacles and promoters of the flexibility they have (not) experienced.

Opening up HE:
Similar to flexible pathways, open access to HE as a policy goal suffers from unclear conceptualisation, which is both an expression of and a cause of the fact that it is not among the prime fields of attention in the Bologna process. Accordingly, policies aimed at achieving greater equity in HE have yet to make much impact in most countries, even where they have been introduced.

What are the obstacles inhibiting the wider implementation of equity policies by governments and institutions (costs? structural issues?)? What obstacles still inhibit the take-up of flexible learning opportunities by the disadvantaged?

Once students are in HE, which types of curriculum flexibility are most beneficial and to what extent do they have to be specifically targeted and with what types of support packages? Regular monitoring of rates of completion is needed to establish the scale of early leaving from programmes.

**Concluding remarks**

In the absence of systematic data on the ultimate effects of the Bologna process on students, we are left with the rumours and moods reported in national media, which is an unsatisfying situation given the fact that most of the measures are ultimately meant to improve students’ experience and graduates’ opportunities, all the resources that have been and are being invested in this process, and the considerable hopes attached to it. Tackling this deficiency is no easy task. But a start needs to be made in a number of areas:

First, it behoves participants in the Bologna process to be more explicit as to the actual intended effects of their interventions on students, rather than, as so often appears to be the case, to take these for granted.

Secondly, as most Bologna policies are ultimately meant to improve student experiences, we need to become more aware of the gap between formal implementation within the law and meaningful implementation 'on the ground', not least in order to help to target policies more effectively.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to start gathering systematic student data for the EHEA to be able to answer the most relevant questions in the future: Do students benefit from the policy measures? How does their experience change? How 'European' has it become? What do student mobility patterns look like? How do students move between Bachelor and Master programmes in terms of programme, regional and international mobility? Where do graduates move etc etc.

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Notes

1. Students that go abroad with part of the credits to complete a degree elsewhere are counted among degree mobility.

2. The available data does not yet differentiate between mobility at Bachelor vs Masters level, a deficit that is acknowledged by many.

References


