

## New Study Programmes and Degree: Does the Bologna Process Encourage or Inconvenience Student Mobility?

- (1) Student mobility became so popular in the 1990s in Europe that it opened the door to greater visions of higher education reforms across borders. Many experts argue that *the ERASMUS “success story” was crucial for further steps of European cooperation* which were formulated in the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and in the Bologna Declaration (1999).
- (2) In fact, the Sorbonne Declaration presented the vision that eventually the majority of students might be mobile. And the Bologna Declaration named *two major objectives for the introduction of a convergent system* of stages of study programmes and degrees all over Europe – both to enhance mobility:
  - To make higher education in European countries *more attractive for students from other areas* of the world willing to study abroad,
  - To *facilitate intra-European mobility*.
- (3) There are three reasons why a bachelor-master/L-M-structure could be viewed as more *attractive for students from other parts of the world*:
  - Initial students from many part of the world could *get a first degree in a shorter period* than within previously dominating long university programmes in a substantial number of European countries/fields of study.
  - The *new degrees awarded could be more similar to home countries degrees* (a cycle system existed in about 80% of countries all over the world) and therefore could be expected to be recognized without complication
  - Students from other countries having attained a bachelor degrees at home will find the new European structure more attractive for advanced study; *studying a master programme in Europe* could be the major attraction of the Bologna Process (in the past, they would have accepted only as students with an interim qualification in a long university programme).
- (4) We note that, in fact, the number of students who came to Europe from other parts of the world has increased in recent years. However, we have no thorough analysis yet *whether this increase is substantially higher than just the push effect* (of more students from these countries being mobile and of increased barriers to study in the U.S.).
- (5) For experts, who have analysed the conditions, processes and outcomes of student mobility in the 1980s and the 1990s, *the claim* of the Sorbonne Declaration and the Bologna Declaration *that structural convergence of study programmes and degrees could facilitate intra-European mobility substantially was an absolute surprise*. Because all available studies have pointed out that *other barriers are more salient*, for example:
  - Financial barriers,
  - language barriers,
  - communication and service barriers (reluctance to study in countries where administrative and academic staff is not very supportive to students in general or specifically not to needs of foreign students),
  - barriers to adapt other environments (food, climate, social and cultural settings, lack of contacts, etc.),
  - curricular barriers (differences in the substance of study programmes and reluctance to accept contrasting substance to that taught at home as equivalent),

- quality barriers (assumed quality differences between study provisions at home and abroad), and
  - recognition barriers (as a consequence of some of the above named actors, an involuntary prolongation of the overall study period due to the period abroad).
- (6) Most systematic information available about the conditions and consequences of intra-European mobility addresses *temporary student mobility* within Europe. In fact, most of intra-European student mobility is “temporary mobility”. Less information is available whether traditional differences of study programmes and degrees in Europe discourage “degree mobility” or cause problems for mobility graduates with regard of academic recognition (for access to advanced study) or professional recognition. A study undertaken in Norway shows that temporary mobile students experience more frequently professional advantages in Norway than students who were awarded a degree abroad. But the authors of the study did not come to the conclusion that limited reward of degree mobility is due to a different structure of study programmes and degrees, but rather to scepticism whether the quality and the curricular profile abroad is trustworthy.
- (7) As regards temporary intra-European mobility, one could assume that the “accompanying measures” to the structural reforms of study programmes in the Bologna Process to facilitate student mobility. The spread of comparable *credits systems* (ECTS or similar) were most often referred to in this context. In fact, an evaluation study of the ERASMUS programme in the late 1990s showed that the credit transfer rate was about 85% while the recognition rate, when no credits were awarded and other ways of documentation of study achievement has prevailed, was only about 75%.
- (8) But some experts and observers came to conclusion that the Bologna Process, in contrast to the initial expectations, has *increased barriers to temporary student mobility* within Europe:
- Teachers discourage students, or students are *less ready to study abroad within relatively short study programmes* (e.g. 3-years bachelor and 2-years master programmes instead of 4-5 years long university programmes) because it is more difficult to spend study periods abroad which are relatively flexible in the home country curriculum.
  - The introduction of shorter study programmes, credit systems, and modular structures has altogether *reduced curricular flexibility*. As a consequence, recognition of the study achievements abroad is likely to decline.

A survey undertaken in 2005, however, showed that these concerns were only shared by about one fifth of the actors experts surveyed. – But the *Bologna discourse has even changed*:

- Initially, high hopes were harboured as regards the effects of the structural reform of study programmes and degree as such. Subsequently, *debate and action increasingly shifted toward substantive issues of study programmes: quality, qualification frameworks and “employability”*. Some experts believe that the Bologna Process is gradually moving towards curricular convergence. If this is true, the most valuable outcome of temporary study abroad, according to ERASMUS evaluation studies, i.e. “learning from contrasts”, would be endangered.
- (9) There are *changes occurring in the conditions of study mobility, which are not caused by the Bologna Process*, but actually interact with the Bologna Process
- We note trends and policies toward increased “vertical diversity” (stratification) of higher education system. As the consequence, the “zones of mutual trust” (i.e. the number of institutions willing to accept achievement at partner institutions with a similar level of academic quality) is likely to get smaller, and the range of possible mobility options is reduced.

- A study on the “professional value of ERASMUS” has shown that over the years temporary mobile students gradually lose their advantages to non-mobile students as regards visible international work tasks in some respects. This might be due to the fact that international experience and international learning grows also for non-mobile students as the consequence of an overall internationalisation trend.

(10) Possible consequences for the future:

- The authors of the study on the professional value of ERASMUS suggest putting *more emphasis on curricular cooperation* along support for mobile students and for more emphasis on Europeanisation and *internationalisation by other means than mobility*, e.g. “internationalisation at home”.
- The High Level Expert Forum on Mobility suggests to increase mobility in higher education five times until 2020. They call for *increased financial support and counteracting manifold barriers*, whereby the structural reform of the Bologna process obviously is viewed as a marginal factor.

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