

# The Bologna process between structural convergence and institutional diversity

**Torsten Dunkel**

Expert in VET, Project Manager working on the early identification of skills needs and education/training as well as the labour market  
Cedefop

## **Keywords**

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## **SUMMARY**

**The merging of the Bologna and the Copenhagen processes into a single European education area appears appropriate, especially as general, vocational, adult and academic education are to be integrated in a future European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This is the backdrop to the following description of the Bologna process, which was originally intended as a European unifying blueprint for the reorganisation of study structures and university degrees but which mutated during its implementation into a surprising array of internationally diverse local reform efforts and outcomes.**

## Introduction

The Lisbon Strategy can be seen as a turning point in European education policy. The Lisbon Agenda set the (economic) policy scene for the EU in the year 2000 with its aim of making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economic area in the world by 2010. Implementation of this aim is based on the Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) Declarations and their follow-up conferences – known as the Bologna process – and, in vocational education and training (VET), on the Copenhagen Declaration (2002), Maastricht Communiqué (2004) and Helsinki Communiqué (2006) – known as the Copenhagen process.

The Bologna process, which was initiated by the Bologna Declaration in 1999 and is currently planned to run until 2010, has triggered a tremendously rapid reorganisation of European higher education. The boundaries between universities and colleges <sup>(1)</sup> in tertiary education, which were previously clearly defined, are becoming increasingly blurred. The harmonisation of university degrees (bachelor's/master's) appears to be leading to the break up of the different categories of higher education institution or the binary categories of higher education institution.

The first part of the paper gives a brief description of the organisation, governance and objectives of the Bologna process from a historical and institutional perspective. The second part shows the introduction of tiered study programmes on the basis of selected examples from a number of countries. The third part describes the implementation status and the first outcomes. Part four discusses the implications of the reform, part five the field of tension between convergence and diversity. In part six, the final part, open questions and lessons for European VET are identified and inferences drawn for a future *alma mater bolognaise*.

## Governance and aims of the Bologna process

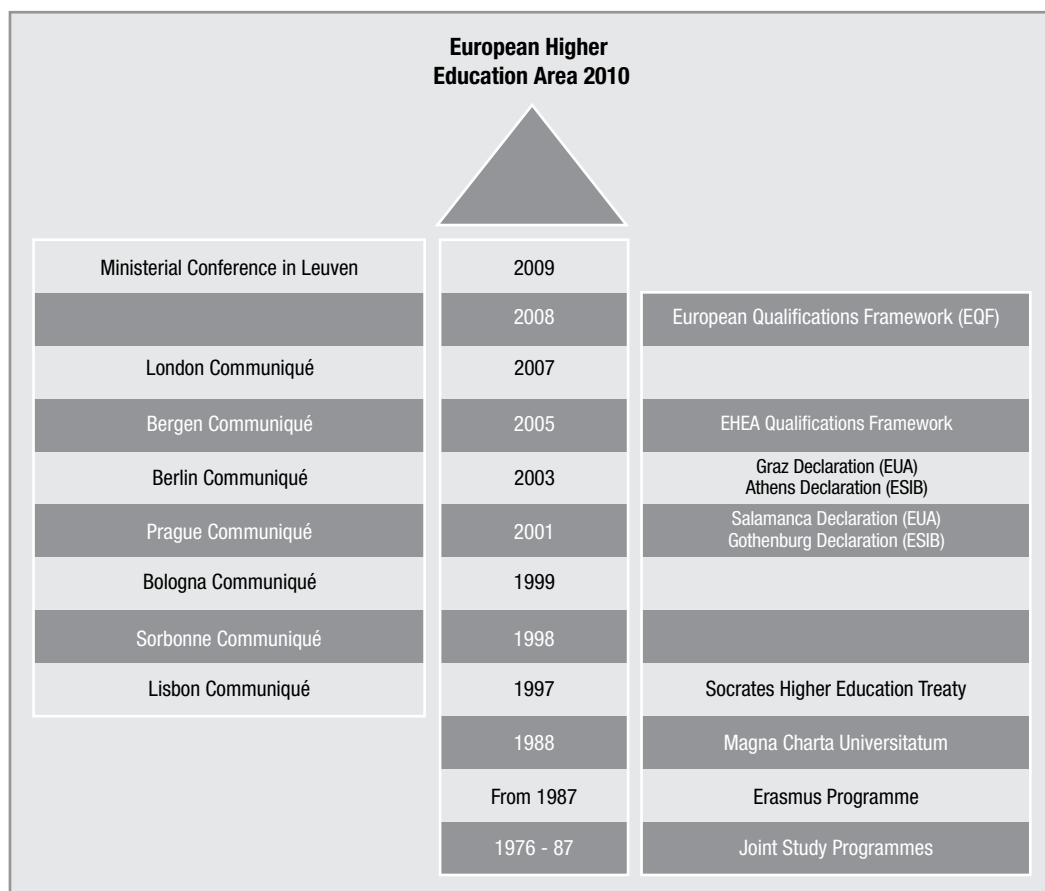
The mobility of students and academic staff and the comparability and recognition of their degrees are important prerequisites for better exploitation of the enormous potential of – and in – European

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(1) By 'colleges' is meant *hogescholen*, *Fachhochschulen*, etc.; for sake of simplicity it will be used below as a collective term for all non-university higher education institutions.

higher education institutes. Which is why, on the occasion of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the University of Paris on 25 May 1998, the four Education Ministers of Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom declared their intention, in the so-called Sorbonne Declaration, to remove barriers and create the basis for enhanced European cooperation in the area of higher education. Earlier integration and cooperation initiatives in the area of higher education can be found in the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (1997), the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988), the Erasmus programme (1987) and the joint study programmes (1976-86).

Figure 1. **The stony path to a single European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**



This was taken up in a wider circle in Bologna and made more concrete. The Bologna process is an inter-governmental process representing a non-binding arrangement between the education ministers of, by now, 46 'European' countries. The process of creating a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) – as shown in Figure 1 – is steered by ministerial conferences that, every two years, take stock of and analyse the progress made and difficulties encountered in meeting the aims and, if necessary, define new priorities (2001 in Prague, 2003 in Berlin, 2005 in Bergen, 2007 in London and 2009 in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve).

Between ministerial conferences meetings of interest groups, such as the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), are held to convey their positions. Also included in the process is the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The Bologna process is not a genuine and original area of European Union (EU) action, although it is apparent that the EU is increasingly involved. Because the EU has set itself the goal of becoming the globally most attractive area by 2010, the Bologna process is bound to be of interest to the EU. The Bologna process coincides with many EU policy areas: the research-oriented framework programmes and the concept of the European Research Area (ERA) also touch on EHEA-related questions. In joint cross-border study programmes, in particular with third countries, the EU finds certain legitimacy for its involvement, and with its Socrates Mundus programme it has taken the initiative on the structuring of study programmes.

The Council of Europe has a special position because it transcends the Europe of the EU and so its field of action is essentially congruent with the total area covered by the Bologna process. In particular, as a result of the 1997 Lisbon Convention that it initiated, the Council of Europe is, by law, the promoter of the transnational recognition of academic degrees in Europe and is therefore involved for factual and legal reasons.

Policy goals or pan-European instruments are implemented using the open method of coordination (OMC). This is a 'soft' method of governance in supranational matters. It relates to the setting and implementation of common goals. The extent to which goals are attained is assessed by a monitoring system, which creates a positive pressure to provide justification, thereby accelerating national implementation. Other instruments used under the OMC are

benchmarking, a reporting requirement and evaluation. In addition to the official Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and national committees, i.e. the national Bologna groups, numerous players, such as non-governmental organisations and inter-governmental organisations, participate at European level in shaping the Bologna process, help to achieve the aims of the process and express opinions through messages and declarations. At the same time, ministers are responsible for implementation of the various concepts at national level.

The Bologna process targets can be grouped into three major themes: (1) promotion of mobility, (2) promotion of international competitiveness and (3) promotion of employability. These major themes cover, among other things (Bologna, 1999; Berlin, 2003; Bergen, 2005):

- creation of a system of easily understandable and comparable degrees, including through the introduction of the Diploma Supplement;
- creation of a two-tier system of degrees (consecutive study programmes, undergraduate/graduate);
- introduction of a credit system, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), as well as modularisation;
- promotion of mobility by the removal of obstacles to mobility; this not only refers to geographical mobility, but also cultural competences, mobility between higher education institutions and training programmes or lifelong and lifewide learning;
- qualitative development of higher education through faculty development, study programme accreditation and promotion of European cooperation on quality development;
- promotion of the European dimension in higher education;
- lifelong and/or lifewide learning;
- student participation (participation in all decisions and initiatives at all levels);
- promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area;
- dovetailing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the European Research Area (ERA), in particular by incorporating doctoral studies in the Bologna process.

A further goal is integration of the social dimension; this is regarded as a transversal measure and does not constitute a separate priority.

The London conference of 2007 focused on the issues of mobility, quality assurance and employability. The Ministers for Education

agreed concrete steps to improve the mobility of students, graduates and staff in the 46 Bologna Member States. This includes joint degrees with foreign universities and more flexible curricula for bachelor's degrees.

Over the next two years the priorities will continue to be development of the three-cycle degree structure, quality assurance and the recognition of degrees and study periods. This includes focusing on the employability of graduates. Although the international mobility of students has increased in the past 10 years and has developed from an elite phenomenon into a normal option, mobility rates for European countries show that the overwhelming majority of students complete their studies only in their home country (Kelo, Teichler, Wächter, 2006).

Each Bologna follow-up conference adds a new sub-goal. The following section will use the introduction of tiered degree cycles to show how 'harmoniously' the original objective of a European standardised reorganisation of study programme structures and higher education degrees developed, in the course of implementation, into a surprising array of internationally diverse local reform outcomes.

## Between convergence and diversity: the introduction of tiered study cycles and the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area

One of the best-known outcomes of the Bologna process is the definition of a system of three consecutive cycles in higher education. These cycles are defined by a framework for higher education degrees (known as the EHEA qualifications framework based on the Dublin descriptors) and ECTS credits (Dunkel, Le Mouillour, 2008a):

- first cycle: typically 180-240 ECTS credits, mainly described as bachelor's degree;
- second cycle: typically 90-120 ECTS credits (minimum 60), mainly described as master's degree;
- third Cycle: Requires independent research. Mainly described as doctorate or PhD. No ECTS credits.

The cycle structure was accompanied by a qualifications framework for higher education degrees to advance the single higher education area. This qualifications framework for higher education degrees,

agreed in Bergen in 2005, is compatible with the emerging EQF, which functions as a meta-framework (for Germany: BMBF, KMK, HRK, 2005). Although this process is out of step with the Bologna process and is driven by different players (European Commission), it promotes a stronger competence and outcome orientation (European Commission, 2006). Thus, the EHEA qualifications framework leads to a common structure that is gaining acceptance in higher education. This general principle behind the introduction of tiered study cycles (BA/MA) is called '3 plus 2'. However, it is doubtful whether this means *e pluribus unum*.

For example, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Malta have always used the tiered system. In Germany, too, the introduction of *Gesamthochschulen* (comprehensive universities) in the 1970s led in some *Länder* to create tiered, consecutive study models awarding a Diploma I (college diploma) and a Diploma II (university degree). The persistence of institutional diversity will be shown below using selected country examples.

The example of German higher education reveals the scope of the changes. Until now, German study programmes have been described primarily in terms of course content, admission criteria and study periods. With qualifications framework, however, the programme can be described on the basis of the qualifications that the graduate will acquire after successfully completing the programme. This reflects the shift from an input-oriented education system to an outcome-oriented one and should improve its transparency. The EQF underscores the paradigm shift envisaged under the Bologna process: more transparent, understandable, and more comparable courses – nationally and internationally – thanks to the clear presentation of the qualification profiles, the definition of entry and exit points and overlaps between education and training courses. Additionally, alternative education paths are made clear by positioning qualifications relative to one other and their development possibilities within the education system.

At first sight, the learning outcome orientation of the EQF appears to be the antithesis of the German VET system, which – in contrast to Anglo-Saxon countries – is highly input- and process-oriented. However, there are a number of evident problems which could possibly be addressed using a learning outcome orientation approach (the undervaluing of German diplomas abroad, the 'transition support system' or *Übergangssystem*, and the lack of bridges between vocation training and higher education) (Dunkel, 2006). Under

the direction of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the standing conference of Education Ministers of the *Länder* (*Kultusministerkonferenz*), a German qualifications framework (DQR) is currently being developed which, as a national framework, will cover all educational areas and be compatible with the European level (Hanf, Rein, 2007).

Below we show how structural convergence is constrained not only by study periods, but by further differentiations, for example academic and vocational professional bachelor's programmes, vocational and research-oriented master's programmes and master's with or without a final thesis. Finally, there are also vocational doctorates.

## Bachelor's degree – the first cycle

In principle, a BA course should last for three years (180 credits). In practice, however, there is a range of different study periods:

- countries with some leeway: 3-4 years (Germany);
- in some countries three years at universities and four years at other higher education institutions;
- in some countries four years is the norm (Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Scotland and Turkey);
- distinction between vocational and academic BA (Finland, the Netherlands and Latvia).

However, since a three-year BA is so concentrated and the curriculum so specialised, it is becoming increasingly impossible to spend a semester at a foreign university without losing time, despite the fact that the Bologna reform is actually supposed to make stays abroad easier.

## Master's degree – the second cycle

In principle, there are two types of master's programme in Europe: short post-graduate programmes lasting 1-2 years (60-120 ECTS credits), which follow on from undergraduate programmes of 3-4 years (180-240 ECTS credits) and long, integrated master's programmes of five years (300 ECTS credits) or more in continental European countries.

Generally the MA should last two years (120 credits). In practice, however, here too we find a range of different study periods:



- 1-1.5 years if the BA takes longer than three years;
- in Sweden and the Netherlands, less than five years for both degree cycles;
- in Austria no more than four years (old *Magister* degree).

In the Netherlands, both universities and *hogescholen* offer Academic and Higher Professional Master's degrees, depending on the programme profile. In Italy, the *Laurea* is awarded after three years as the first university degree (180 ECTS), and after another 120 ECTS the *Laurea specialistica* is obtained. In Greece, after four to five years the *Ptychio* or diploma is awarded. After one to two more years of post-graduate studies, a master's-type degree is awarded.

Thus, tiered degree cycles have converged to a much lesser extent than originally expected. In almost every country there are exceptions to the restructuring, which concern mainly the State-regulated professions (law, teaching, medicine). In Germany, the first master's programmes for teachers and the bachelor of medicine have recently been introduced.

There are also consecutive and continuing education programmes ('3 plus 2' or '4 plus 1') as well as research- and application-oriented master's programmes leading either to an M.A. <sup>(2)</sup> or an M.Sc. <sup>(3)</sup>, while the more practice-oriented programmes lead to an M.Eng <sup>(4)</sup>. It is interesting to note in this connection the 'TU 9 initiative', which fears for the good reputation of German technical education and, therefore, rejects any light-weight bachelor's degree. The TU 9 <sup>(5)</sup> is an association of what it itself describes as traditional and successful Institutes of Technology (*Technische Hochschulen*) for quality assurance in the education of engineers. They clearly define and mutually recognise the BA/MA degrees of their engineering graduates with the goal of positioning the university master's degree as the successor to the *Diplomingenieur* ('the bachelor's degree opens all the doors, the master's degree is the goal').

The educational goals and course profiles of colleges and universities in Germany continue to differ considerably. On the one hand, convergence processes are taking place that favour complete

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<sup>(2)</sup> M.A: Master of Arts.

<sup>(3)</sup> M.Sc: Master of Science.

<sup>(4)</sup> M.Eng: Master of Engineering.

<sup>(5)</sup> TU 9: Association of nine German Institutes of Technology for quality assurance in engineering education.

equality for colleges, including the right to confer doctoral degrees; on the other, efforts are being made to confine the courses that can be offered by colleges to BAs.

However, the opposite can also be found: Bulgaria, Denmark, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary do not distinguish between different profiles.

Germany is one of the countries where the formal differentiation between the various master's programmes is particularly elaborate. This tends to be the case precisely in those countries where the higher education system is divided into two (binary system) or more (ternary system) types. The course profile classifications serve primarily to neutralise the broadly overlapping functions of the different types of education institution, which came into being for the introduction of the tiered system of programmes and degrees.

## Doctorate – the third cycle

Trends since Berlin 2003 and Bergen 2005 towards a shortening of the time it takes doctoral students to complete their studies and towards preventing them from dropping out include:

- structured doctorate studies integrated into graduate schools, programmes and centres, introduction of taught elements, fast-track BAs; and
- improved quality through joint supervision, evaluations and the creation of a critical mass of professors and researchers as well as ethical codes for research.

The target of a 3 % share <sup>(6)</sup> of GDP for R&D has consequences for the production of knowledge in higher education. In many countries the education of doctoral candidates is regarded as too long, too academic, too narrow and not particularly relevant to non-academic labour markets. The status of doctoral candidate – and hence the social and material situation of doctoral candidates themselves – differs from institution to institution. The status can range from fee-paying student required to take seminars (United Kingdom), to young scientist on a contract enjoying social benefits (Norway). In between there are all sorts of hybrid forms and combinations of various elements. There is also traditional individual supervision by a thesis supervisor.

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<sup>(6)</sup> R&D: Research and Development.

## State of implementation and first visible results

According to the Trends V Report of the European University Association (EUA), 82 % of 908 higher education institutions surveyed in Europe have introduced tiered study programmes. However, only 74 % consider it important to achieve rapid progress in implementing the Bologna reforms. The others appear to be introducing the reform somewhat reluctantly. The lifelong learning objective was considered to be a priority for higher education institutions by only 17 % of respondents. Of the 908 higher education institutions that have implemented ECTS, 75 % referred to their use as a transfer instrument, and 66 % mentioned them as an accumulation instrument (Crosier, Purser, Smidt, 2007). This change in function for credit systems from mere transfer to accumulation, and from an input-orientation (in the sense of workload or learning effort) to a learning outcome-oriented approach, reflects the concept of lifelong learning and the new notion of the learning and working phases in the lives of individuals (Dunkel, Le Mouillour, 2008a).

In addition, there are country-specific particularities of emphasis in the state of implementation of the Bologna reforms that reflect the nationally-oriented interpretation of the common European agenda, for example (BMBF, 2005):

- implementation of a comprehensive quality reform in Norway;
- basic clarification of the relationship between higher education institutions and the State/governance through a Law on higher education in Austria;
- abolition of the binary system by a Law on higher education in Hungary;
- introduction of the BA/MA in Germany by 2009/10;
- positioning within the EHEA, as otherwise possible danger of outsider position within the Bologna mainstream (United Kingdom);
- since 2002 rapid implementation/higher education Law in the Netherlands;
- 2003-09 regional implementation; the LMD (*Licence-Master-Doctorat*) system becomes the new standard in France, whereby three-year bachelor's degrees are based on DEUG (*Diplôme d'Études Universitaires Générales*)/DEUST (*Diplôme d'Études Scientifiques et Techniques*), and two-year master's degrees based on Maîtrise + DESS (*Diplôme d'Enseignement Supérieur Spécialisé*)/DEA (*Diplôme d'Études Approfondies*).

A highly uneven implementation is, in a nutshell, the preliminary assessment of the results of the introduction the BA/MA system:

- the degree of convergence ('harmonisation') is lower than expected;
- no uniform logic behind study periods and types. There is a multitude of models for the duration of study programmes, ranging from 3+1 to 3+2, 4+1 and from 3.5+1.5 to 4+2 years;
- some subjects have been excluded from the tiered system;
- countries have made varying degrees of progress in implementation;
- national reform agendas are integrated under the 'Bologna' label;
- the European qualifications framework and, where applicable, a national qualifications network is being discussed and/or introduced;
- accreditation systems are being developed;
- more competition and vertical mobility is being generated.

The introduction of the BA/MA model is making progress in Germany. Of the bachelor's or *Bakkalaureus* courses on offer, 2 649 are at universities <sup>(7)</sup>, 1 836 at *Fachhochschulen* (universities of applied science) <sup>(8)</sup> and 56 at *Kunst- und Musikhochschulen* (colleges of art and music). Master's degree programmes are offered by 1 976 universities, 1 041 *Fachhochschulen* and 48 *Kunst- und Musikhochschulen*. Each of the three types of higher education institution (universities, *Fachhochschulen*, and *Kunst- und Musikhochschulen* – in fewer cases) are increasing the number of their course options within the bachelor's/master's system by 10 % compared with the previous semester.

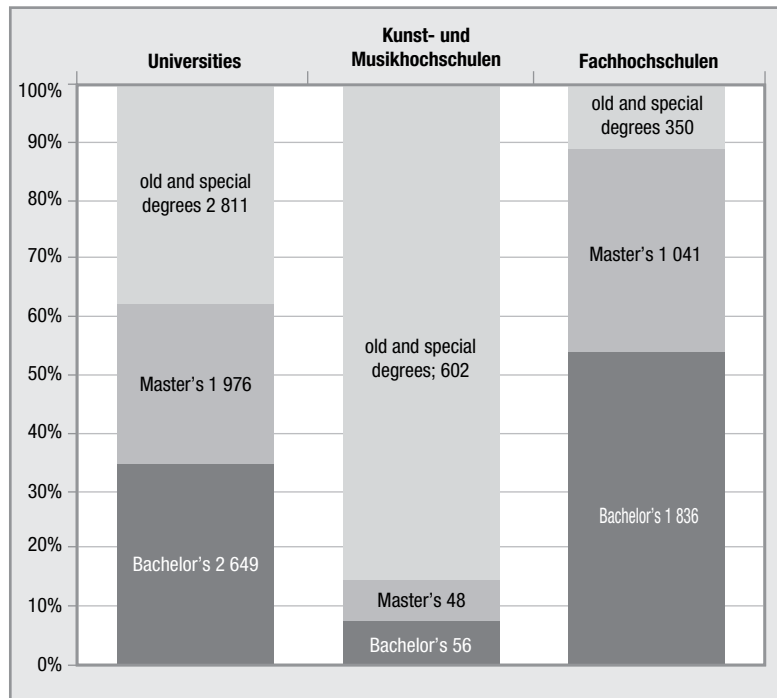
Comparing these figures with the total number of courses offered by universities and *Fachhochschulen*, we can see that – taking bachelor's and master's degrees together – universities already offer 62 % (4 625) of their total courses (7 436) in a tiered course structure <sup>(9)</sup>. In the case of *Fachhochschulen*, this share is already as high as 89 % of the total number of total courses on offer (2 877 out of 3 227). The percentage is currently 15 % (104 out of 706) for *Kunst- und Musikhochschulen*, where the reform did not come into effect until later because the structure targets common to all countries included an exception that applied until June 2005.

<sup>(7)</sup> Universities also include Technical Universities as well as Teacher Training Colleges and Colleges of Theology.

<sup>(8)</sup> Colleges of Administration have not been included here, as their course options do not appear in official higher education publications.

<sup>(9)</sup> The total number courses on offer includes basic and advanced courses.

Figure 2. **Courses on offer and degree types for the summer term 2008 in Germany (As at 1.3.2008)**



Source: HRK, 2008.

The Bologna process affects the traditional distribution of roles among higher education institutions. For example, the division of labour in Germany used to be as follows: the universities educated for what is known as the *höherer Dienst* (senior civil service) and *Fachhochschulen* for the *gehobener Dienst* (higher civil service). Members of the *höherer Dienst* include, for example, secondary school teachers, lawyers who have passed their civil service examination and chemists with a university degree. Examples of members of the *gehobener Dienst* are architects, engineers with a degree from a *Fachhochschule*, *Rechtspfleger* (high level court clerks with judicial functions) and *Verwaltungswirte* (graduates in administration). In future, will universities increasingly have to devote a considerable portion of their teaching capacity to meet a demand which, under the binary system, would actually be the task of *Fachhochschulen*? (Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, 2006). Put another way, the reorganisation of degrees now gives universities the opportunity

to position themselves, using BA degrees, in the education market for the *gehobener Dienst*. On the other hand, *Fachhochschulen* can now also offer master's degree courses; however, their graduates are required to undergo a complex recognition procedure before they can be admitted to the *höherer Dienst*. Will there be a 'second-class Bologna', and are the *Fachhochschulen* in danger of becoming the losers of the reform? Or are they exploiting opportunities to position themselves in line with their unique selling point (USP)? In this connection, we need to clarify what function *Fachhochschulen* in Germany – or their equivalents in other Bologna countries – (should) have, including in an EHEA.

By opening the markets of *Fachhochschulen* to universities and the markets of universities to *Fachhochschulen* and by upgrading *Berufsakademien* (Universities of Cooperative Education) as providers for tertiary education, the Bologna process reshapes the higher education landscape. However, competition is constrained by differing requirements: for example, teaching loads of eight hours (university) and 18 hours (*Fachhochschule*), shortage of non-professorial teaching staff, allocation of public funds for research purposes, most recently under the Excellence Initiative.

The introduction of consecutive degrees has led especially to more bureaucracy, but not more mobility for students, who, as part of a short six- or four-semester degree (*Kurzstudium*), have now been fitted into a Taylorised module and credit system that clearly hinders free movement in the European Higher Education Area. Against this background, trying to achieve greater flexibility by changing lecture times is like taking a closed birdcage from the house into the garden and wondering why the caged bird does not fly away.

While personnel managers of large enterprises and employers' associations are giving bachelor's degrees a high-profile welcome (BDA, 2004 and 2006; Bergs, Konegen-Grenier, 2005), for SMEs the situation is somewhat unclear. Uncertainties remain about the job prospects of university bachelor graduates, even among those just starting their studies (HIS, 2007). Clarification is also needed on whether the bachelor's serves as an entry qualification for all highly qualified professions or only for the *gehobener Dienst* and the like, what the *Fachhochschule* bachelor's should look like (Schomburg, Teichler, 2007) and whether it will even come to a 'bachelorisation' of higher vocational education. This is also linked to the issue of permeability (*Durchlässigkeit*) or facilitating access to higher education for those without the qualifications traditionally

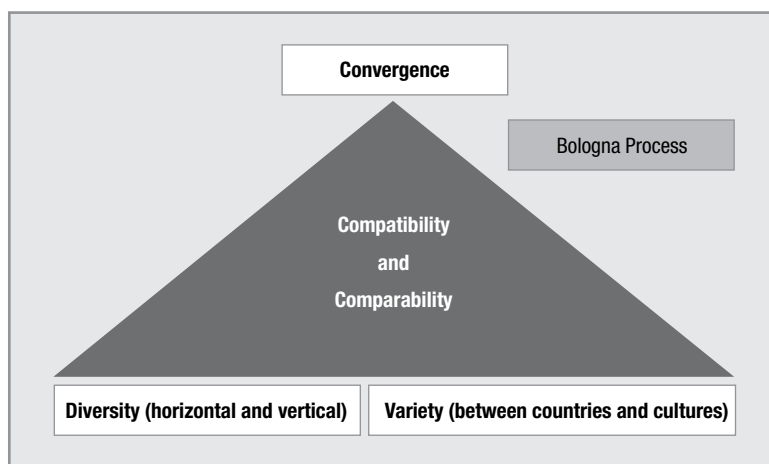
required to enter university or *Fachhochschule*, and settling the rates of transition from the bachelor's to the master's degree (immediately or at a later stage).

Finally, the importance of doctorates (and the right of *Fachhochschulen* to confer doctorates) is growing for activities outside science. This also means closer links between higher education institutions and enterprises with a view to increasing knowledge transfer and positioning higher education institutions within the strategic knowledge triangle of education, innovation and research.

## The field of tension

From the line of reasoning followed so far, we can conclude that the compatibility and comparability of degrees are located in a field of tension between convergence and diversity. Diversity encompasses the system, the structure, the programmes, procedures, reputation and constituents as well as the values and climate (Birnbbaum, 1983) or the multiplicity of institutional profiles (Bartelse, van Vught, 2007). Diversity is understood as meaning the diversity (horizontal and vertical) within a higher education system, for example the transition from a bachelor's to master's degree, and variety (between countries and cultures).

Figure 3. **The field of tension between convergence and diversity**



The conflicting targets of the Bologna process could lead to a clash between the trend towards a unitary concept on the one hand and national traditions on the other. What is important here is to strike a balance between convergence and diversity so as to facilitate mobility and safeguard the diversity of European traditions.

This field of tension is a sign of the multi-speed Europe, in which – depending on basic position, political creativity and resonance in the higher education systems – the participating countries are positioned differently in relation to the sub-goals and the progress made towards meeting them.

## Open questions and the lessons of ‘Bolognaisation’ for European vocational training

Vocational training and higher education have historically taken very different paths. Both have reacted to modernisation demands according to their own logic, and without reference to one another. From the outset, they have both had different educational goals, different concepts and different criteria. Today, two European cities stand for the two systems, but also for their convergence: Copenhagen and Bologna. Matters are not helped by the fact that many find it difficult to stop thinking in terms of conventional structures. And, finally, both systems – vocational training and higher education – are in a phase of radical change.

The task at hand is to create an efficient and permeable education system that satisfies both the ambitions of individuals and the demands of society, in other words a system in which degrees open doors.

If we forecast medium-term employment developments up to the year 2015 and foresee the growing demand for skilled workers and qualifications (Cedefop, 2008), it is very clear that the entire education system needs to be much more permeable and flexible if we are to ensure an adequate supply of highly qualified skilled labour.

Whereas at the beginning of the debate (Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997) there was mention of diverse European higher education systems, now, given the future EHEA, there is only talk of a qualitatively converging European higher education system. Even with this subtle nuance and increasing uptake in a more flexible way, it remains unclear how far the ‘zones of mutual trust’ extend and to what extent differentiation is kept within limits, i.e.



how much diversity can a system that is supposed to be convergent cope with? (Le Mouillour, Teichler, 2004). In other words, to what extent is convergence of the quality and profile of BA/MA degrees desirable? The higher the level of essential differentiation due to the diversity of students' talents, institutional resources and employment system demands, the more convergence measures can increase actual mobility opportunities. Mobility is improved only to a limited extent by similar or identical degrees, while differentiation by quality and profile increases in other courses and can no longer be bypassed by measures to promote recognition (Kehm, Teichler, 2006). Whereas similar courses of study were regarded as a basis for mobility in higher education, this is not necessarily the case for vocational training. Short degrees are apparently becoming more important, and the type of higher education institution less important. This has consequences for the institutional configuration of the higher education system. Is structural convergence promoted to facilitate recognition in view of quality and profile differences, or should it be an instrument for increasing the convergence of quality and profiles?

In this connection, the change of terminology is interesting. The original 'harmonisation' became 'greater compatibility and comparability' and has now developed into the trend towards 'more uniformity' of the national higher education systems in Europe, a 'structural convergence' in which there is still room for a variety of types of institution.

In terms of the field of tension described above, this development may pointedly be described as a trend towards 'vocational higher education institutions' or 'general vocational training'. The Bologna process promotes such a convergence of structures in three ways:

1. a greater similarity in the formal structure of university and *Fachhochschule* degrees is emerging;
2. a greater overlapping of the functions of the two types of higher education institution can be observed;
3. an increase in the vertical differentiation with regard to quality and reputation is to be expected.

Another lesson of the 'Bolognisation' of education concerns the potential threat to domestic political agendas posed in principle by supranational initiatives. Their invisible hand has an effect on the generally national focus of domestic attempts at solutions. The greater sensitivity to European approaches to certain higher education policy issues can lead to policy imitation. In some circumstance, it

may bring about a possible convergence of sub-policies or simply policy learning in an evolutionary sense (Dunkel, 2005). However, a degree of suspicion in this connection is understandable as it can be assumed that there are a number of more or less hidden agendas behind the stated aims of the Bologna process. Students, for example, fear that the process will be exploited, through the introduction of tuition fees, in such a way that the bachelor's will be free and fees will be charged for all subsequent study phases, and so the process will turn out to be a savings programme with curtailed educational opportunities.

In keeping with the oft mentioned 'enhanced cooperation among education players', the rhetorical element of policy development and implementation should not be underestimated, for example in the case of the national progress reports on the Bologna process, when one signatory State is the first to achieve a certain target of the reforms (e.g. introduction of the Diploma Supplement or development of the qualifications framework for higher education degrees). The Bologna process can be used in this manner to strengthen national positions within the international debate.

Finally, questions remain concerning the relationship between the Bologna and the Copenhagen-Maastricht-Helsinki processes, which have so far been running in parallel, and the possibility of bridges and links in relation to the Lisbon strategy and, therefore, the role of continuing education, which has been treated as somewhat of an orphan so far (Dunkel, Le Mouillour, 2008b).

## Conclusions: towards an *alma mater bolognaise*

Most European countries now face the common challenge of providing all future employees with the knowledge and skills they will need in a knowledge-based economy, with its emphasis on flexibility, adaptability and competence. The growing importance of lifelong learning was stressed in both the Bologna and Lisbon processes. These parallel processes were merged for the first time in the 2004 in the Maastricht Communiqué, which explicitly refers to the need to improve permeability within education and training systems and the recognition of qualifications on the basis of learning outcomes were explicitly mentioned, and in the Helsinki Communiqué (2006) with its focus on improving the attractiveness and quality of vocational education and training (CQAF <sup>(10)</sup>, ENQA-

VET), continuing to develop and implement common instruments (ECTS, ECVET, EQF, Europass), mutual learning and the inclusion of all stakeholders. Consequently, universities as places of general education are now increasingly faced with a more vocationally oriented function. At the same time the growth in interdisciplinary knowledge in areas that used to be purely technical has created a demand for more general knowledge.

For higher education institutions, the implications of the Bologna process entail positioning problems on the one hand and market opportunities on the other, as demonstrated by the situation of universities and *Fachhochschulen* in Germany. The reforms implemented so far under the Bologna process are presumably irreversible. In the near future studying will look different from today. The higher education landscape is undergoing radical change, but the participating countries are going for solutions that are not entirely consistent. Implementation of the Bologna reforms represents a cultural and social transformation that has triggered a series of developments and a momentum of its own in those countries. In spite of convergence trends within what is called 'tertiary education', diversity persists in the shape of non-uniform system logic as regards the scope of the introduction and duration of tiered degrees, which means that ultimately there is no way around the effort to try and really understand the higher education systems of our neighbouring countries.

The Bologna process will formally end in 2010, but this will not spell the end of the project. The external dimension of the Bologna process will become increasingly important. In the coming years, the Bologna member states will seek to step up exchanges with non-European countries, some of which are already aligning their higher education systems on the future European Higher Education Area. The growing interest in the European Higher Education Area on other continents as a model for the approximation of national education systems that have evolved from different traditions creates opportunities for the higher education area as an export commodity. The participating States intend to distribute more information on the European Higher Education Area, develop cooperation based on partnership, intensify policy dialogue and facilitate the recognition

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(<sup>10</sup>) In April 2008, the European Commission presented a proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (CEC, 2008).

of other degrees. This should further enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area.

The outlook for the period after 2010 includes access to higher education that depends solely on the abilities of applicants, better exploitation of the potential of the tiered course structure, whether it is in the master's degree or continuing education, and the removal of further obstacles to mobility – for example, pension rights when researchers move to another country. Ultimately, other policy areas will also have to contribute towards the development of the European Higher Education Area.

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