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Bologna: where do we stand?

Anna Riley*

1. Introduction

It is ten years since the Bologna Declaration was signed by the Ministers or deputy Ministers of 29 European countries. The original document outlines seven concrete objectives which signatory countries commit to undertaking, with which many are now very familiar: The adoption of easily readable and comparable degrees through the use of a Diploma Supplement; the introduction of a system based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, where the first cycle is relevant to the European labour market and access to the second cycle is based upon successful completion of the first; the establishment of a system of credits, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS); the promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to mobility for students and teachers; the promotion of European cooperation in Quality Assurance; the promotion of the necessary European Dimensions in Higher Education and consolidation of a European area of higher education while fully respecting the diversity of European cultures, languages, national education systems and university autonomy[1].

In the decade that has followed the number of signatory countries has risen to 46, and the objectives have been extended for example to emphasise the role of students and industry in reform and to include the doctoral cycle [2] [3]. The basic expectation underlying these changes is that we will see a convergence in higher education policies across Europe with improved comparability and mobility between European higher education institutions and a more competitive European higher education area.

In reality, the practical application of the Bologna Process, sometimes referred to as the Bologna Reform - I say sometimes because it is not a reform in all cases – has lead to massive changes in higher education in some countries, including Switzerland, but in others has not yet moved beyond the discussion phase, as in the case of the UK.

In this article I will look at where Switzerland stands at present in relation to the Bologna reform. First I will consider the extent to which Swiss universities have complied with the Bologna Reform, and second, and more interestingly, the impact it is having on education. I will then briefly consider the next step in the reform and the possibilities for a positive impact on higher education in Switzerland. I draw on my own research into the implementation of Bologna in selected science, engineering, arts and law departments in eight universities across Switzerland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom to give an idea of the opinions of those implementing the reform, and to place the changes that have been achieved and have yet to be achieved in Switzerland, in an international context.. The data presented is both qualitative and quantitative, taken from interviews with key actors in each department and faculty, and a wider online survey with professors and teaching staff. As an aim of the research is to compare the implementation of the Bologna process in specialised and non-specialised universities, this distinction is also made in the results reported. Unless otherwise stated all quotations are taken from interviewees in the Swiss universities.

2. The reform so far

In universities across Switzerland massive changes have taken place in the way in which the degree structure is organised. The main elements - two-cycle degrees with the 3+2 structure, the use of a diploma supplement and ECTS compatible credit point system based on learning outcomes - are, to a great extent, now in place, and with much success: a recent survey by the Rectors Conference of the Swiss Universities (CRUS) showed a high level of satisfaction among students with their degree courses[4]. There are, however, two main areas which are still problematic: improving student mobility and the status of the Bachelor degree.

Student mobility is actively promoted across universities in Switzerland. The aims set by the CRUS of 25% of students changing university between the Bachelor and the Master degree have almost been achieved[5] and mobility is viewed very positively within the system both by the students who can experience study elsewhere and also by depart-

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ments receiving strong students from abroad. But improvements in mobility resulting from increased awareness of the options among staff and students have, in some cases, been offset by the loss of flexibility in the new three year Bachelor stage. Although it is too early to examine trends, a respondent in one physics department predicted that participation in exchange programmes would decrease, but there would be an increase in mobility between the Bachelor and Master level. In another physics department mobility overall had decreased due to perceived difficulties about timing and recognition.

This threat to horizontal mobility is well recognised and not peculiar to Switzerland. In one of the Dutch universities studied in two departments, student mobility was considered to have improved in terms of recognition of time spent abroad, but the new structures had made it more difficult. One respondent commented "outgoing mobility is a disaster".

The Bachelor degree is also a sticking point in achieving compliance. It is stated in the Bologna Declaration that the degree awarded after the first cycle should be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. In the Swiss universities studied, the majority of respondents felt that the Bachelor degree was not sufficient for employment in industry. This is not only the feeling amongst professors and teaching staff, but is shared by students too. The recent CRUS report suggests that 75% of students intend to begin a Masters upon completion of the Bachelor degree. The number is higher in the two technical universities EPFL 93% and ETHZ 84%. The most common reasons cited among students were increased chances on the employment market, and that the master's degree was "the logical end to the studies" [6].

The Bachelor level degree may be an appropriate level of qualification for the labour market but it is not perceived as such. The two-tier system is seen by many to be at odds with the culture of Swiss universities, and the very nature of what a good university level education requires. A physics professor from a leading Swiss university outlines the difference as follows "in the Bachelor programme it is intended that students get a broad knowledge and learn to apply it. In the MSc the biggest part is the thesis – this comes close to scientific research. Both are considered fundamental to education: two stages of the educational process; 3 year basic, 2 year specialisation".

This view is not limited to Switzerland: the same problem is being experienced in the United Kingdom with the Master of Science degrees (MSci). Here science education has been developed from the normal 3+1 structure to a continuous four year degree with a Master's qualification at the end. A physics professor commented on the proposed 3+2 structure: "that was the Anglo Saxon system ten years ago. We have moved on... the British have taken the initiative to move on. I can't see a way of squaring the circle". As in Switzerland, the 3+2 structure is seen as inappropriate for science education and a step in the wrong direction. In contrast to Switzerland as yet British universities are under no obligation to change their degrees, but concern is rising within science and engineering departments.

In Switzerland the problem is not limited to certain subjects however. The Bachelor-Master structure requires an entirely different approach to education than the Lizentiat. One professor told me "It is designed for a different system, a different school system, and that is the problem...In Switzerland the university is an elitist institution and we want to keep that." In Switzerland only around 25% of school leavers have access to university education, compared to an EU average of over 60% [7]. Another professor added "It must be nice as a student to stop after a Bachelor, but I don't know what they are doing. A mass university for the Bachelor... it is exactly the opposite of the Swiss way." Because of this level of selection in the school system, and the fact every Bachelor student has the right to enter a Masters programme, it is difficult to say whether the status of the Bachelor degree as an "unfinished" degree will change.

Despite the extensive reforms that have taken place in Switzerland, there remain a number of areas where changes haven't been made. Some aspects of the Bologna reform have become secondary to others across all three countries researched. Staff mobility hasn't changed in any of the departments studied, bar one, and was generally described as unconnected to the reform. An increase in "European content" in programmes was reported in only one university department. Across all eight universities studied actors thought this aspect of the Bologna Process to be less important than others. Inter-institutional cooperation has also been largely unaffected by the reform, as have the number of joint degree programmes. Integrated programmes of study were reported in some areas, though largely locally for the sharing of resources. These changes can only be achieved once the new structures are working properly and the necessary legal reforms have been made in Switzerland and other countries. Reform at the doctoral level and the establishment of doctoral schools and doctoral programmes has begun in some areas will also be developed in the second wave.

3. The impact of Bologna

Despite the optimistic report released by the CRUS, there are many who are unhappy with imposition of the new structures. From the interviews carried out two main themes become clear. The first is the ef-

fect of the new structures on student choice. There is a perceived negative impact on student independence: "We used to have lots of optional courses. Students used to be able to decide individually how to do it. Now it's very planned. We are still trying to offer lots of options but it's very difficult. The independence of students is lost. They will follow a set plan rather than their own." This fear is especially prevalent following the introduction of credit points, described as "the most disastrous consequence in terms of the attitude of students". A faculty administrator suggested "Students will look for the most credit points. They will move away from interests to most effective way of using time"

Adding to the frustration is the fact that the massive changes don't appear to be delivering the promised goods, and not only in relation to mobility. The Bachelor-Master system has been implemented differently in different countries, and "interaction with the Anglo Saxon model hasn't improved. Inside Europe there is the same problems as before". Credit points aren't easily transferable "there is no definition of a module, and ECTS use differs between departments", and haven't solved the problem of reading foreign degrees "It's very hard to harmonise evaluation systems – nobody wants to open the black box. To grade papers we just read it here: second mark it to prevent it being too easy or too difficult... ECTS is still a system of complicated translation."

Yet, although there is a tendency to focus on the negative aspects of Bologna, the reform has brought many positive changes. As is the case in many periods of reform the Bologna process has brought a chance to re-examine the education system. One professor told me that following the reform "people think actively about what physics education should contain and how it should be structured. Bologna is an opportunity to think about education". This sentiment was echoed across the universities studied in a variety of departments where goals had been strengthened and new teaching methods introduced. In addition "[The Bologna Process] has also helped structuring the education process. The Bachelor requires certain competencies, the Masters others. We are forced to better the structure and think about the entirety." A period of reform isn't only a chance to strengthen what is already in place, but to begin something new: "It has opened up minds and shown how we could do things differently". "Innovative professors will have more space to make changes".

Other benefits were reported in terms of increased contact between professors and students, improved support systems for students, and increased transparency. Within the faculties "it is more quantifiable and therefore easier to plan", "The Bologna Reform improves the transparency of the curriculum. It makes it easier to collaborate and discuss and promotes streamlining: cutting things out that were doubled". Internationally "it forces universities to compete and be visible as there is more competition to attract good students". And for students "the effect on Quality Assurance is positive. Transparency is improved. Students can know the courses". While student independence may be limited, their choices

Despite this enthusiasm the overall result of the survey show that, at the time of research (2006-2008), the reform was thought to have had a mainly positive effect on teaching only in the non-specialised Swiss universities, and by a large proportion only in the Swiss Romande. The response is mixed in the specialised universities, with a negative perception in the German speaking part.

Table 1. ***The effect of the Bologna Process on excellence in teaching***

Institution	Number	Percentage of respondents			
	N	Positive	Negative	No effect	Don't know
UK University	21	4.8	19.0	19.0	57.1
UK Specialised university	11	27.3	45.5	9.1	18.2
NL University	19	52.6	31.6	0.0	15.8
NL Specialised University	14	64.3	14.3	7.1	14.3
CHF University	25	44.0	12.0	20.0	24.0
CHF Specialised University	19	36.8	36.8	21.1	5.3
CHG University	32	37.5	25.0	12.5	25.0
CHG Specialised University	25	20.0	44.0	28.0	8.0

Of more concern is the effect that the Bologna reform is thought to have had on research. In both the Swiss specialised universities an overwhelmingly negative effect was reported. This is a result of the time pressures associated with increased administration and teaching, as well as the separation of students from research at the Bachelor level. In the non-specialised universities however it appears there has been much less impact. This is because the impact is felt most strongly in certain subjects: a review of the results of the survey by subject shows that more respondents felt the reform had had a negative impact on research in science (50%) and engineering (67.9%) subjects than in the arts (23.5%) or law (30.8%).

Table 2. ***The effect of the Bologna Process on excellence in research***

Institution	Number	Percentage of respondents			
	N	Positive	Negative	No effect	Don't know
UK University	21	4.8	23.8	14.3	57.1
UK Specialised university	11	0.0	54.5	27.3	18.2
NL University	19	26.3	42.1	10.5	21.1
NL Specialised University	14	21.4	35.7	21.4	21.4
CHF University	25	4.0	36.0	44.0	16.0
CHF Specialised University	19	15.8	68.4	10.5	5.3
CHG University	32	6.3	34.4	37.5	21.9
CHG Specialised University	25	8.0	52.0	28.0	12.0

When asked for an assessment of the effect of the overall impact of the reform on the standard of education and research however, the results were less damming. In the Swiss Romande, a greater positive effect was recorded. In the German speaking universities roughly a quarter of respondents reported a negative effect and the largest number reported no effect.

Table 3. ***The effect of the Bologna Process on the overall standard of education and research***

Institution	Number	Percentage of respondents		
University	*N*	Positive	Negative	No effect
NL University	19	73.7	0.0	26.3
NL Specialised University	14	85.7	0.0	14.3
CHF University	24	45.8	20.8	33.3
CHF Specialised University	19	63.2	15.8	21.1
CHG University	32	34.4	25.0	40.6
CHG Specialised University	23	26.1	26.1	47.8

4. Looking forward

Looking back at the reform there are mixed reactions, but looking ahead it appears that once the structures have settled things may improve in terms of achieving the goals of Bologna as well as feelings towards the whole process. The reactions to the reform are to a certain extent dependent on when respondents were asked for their opinions. As the reforms were implemented at different times there was a marked difference in responses from those

who had completed the initial workload and were considering the changes in hindsight, and those who were in the middle of a major upheaval. As one respondent put it, "the first reaction is always negative to change, but this lessens over time".

Now that the basic structures are in place, emphasis can shift from the two-tier system to Quality Assurance which should have a positive impact on teaching. Although many remain sceptical concerning the amount of time this may take up: "quality is basically helped by the changes in quality assurance... it might be too administratively heavy and not improve content, but it should". Some observers suggest this is the key aspect in the whole process[8].

The experience of other countries which have implemented the reform suggests that some improvements will be felt, even in areas in which there are current difficulties. While the Netherlands has a very different system of higher education than that found in Switzerland with a high degree of centralisation and a history of recent reform which laid a strong foundation for the implementation of the Bologna Process, of the three countries studied it is at present the best indicator we have. In the Dutch case over 90% of respondents felt the Bologna Reform had had a positive effect on mobility, and over 70% of respondents in each university also reported a positive impact on access for international students. The results of the survey indicated above show that a majority of respondents in the Netherlands felt that the whole reform had had a positive impact on teaching, although at the expense of research. There was overwhelming support for the process however, with no respondents in either of the universities researched reporting a negative effect.

The area in which problems are still felt in the Netherlands is in the comparability and compatibility of courses. In the non-specialised university 47.4% of respondents feel the effect on comparability is negative, in the specialised university the response was 64.3% positive. 57% of respondents in both universities feel the Bologna reform has improved the compatibility of courses. Considering this is the overall aim of the process these numbers are still rather low, and this may be a function of the lack of changes in some countries. However, it is also indicative of the national nature of reforms: the new system is adapted in many cases to fit the old, as has been seen in the case of Switzerland and the UK.

5. Conclusions

Ten years in, the Bologna declaration has had a major impact across the field of Higher Education in Europe, and certainly in Swiss universities. There are however problems that need to be resolved, particularly in regards to facilitating mobility within the new structures, and achieving greater coherence in the awarding of credits. The issue of the status of the Bachelor degree is one which is shared elsewhere in Europe, and is linked strongly to the issue of employability as is clear from the latest Trends report[9]. The key recommendation in the trends report for addressing this issue is establishing a dialogue between the institutions, public authorities, employers and citizens. In this way it can be ensured that students have a relevant and usable qualification upon graduation from the first cycle.

Internationally the largest barrier to the success of the Bologna Process at present is the national differences in the implementation of the new structures. This is an inevitable consequence of the wide range of educational cultures involved, and ensures that the national values are respected but it threatens the development of a European Higher Education Area. Perhaps not surprisingly given it's rhetorical nature, when asked to rate the importance of the aims of the Bologna Reform the creation of the EAHE was the lowest priority for respondents who were more concerned with the more immediate issues of mobility, excellence in teaching and achieving comparability and compatibility. Nevertheless, small national differences can hamper the recognition of degrees and time spent abroad, and therefore the more immediate aims of the Bologna Process.

Ten years on much of the ground work has been done for the first phase, and attention is now focussed on tightening quality assurance and reforming the third cycle (doctoral level) and the consolidation and improvement of Bachelor and Masters courses. Despite the frequent negative press and the limitations it has imposed in some areas, the Bologna reform has been largely positively received and has created a chance to strengthen University education in many areas. 40.2% of all respondents to the survey saw the reform as an opportunity for wider improvements. The Bologna reform can provide a chance for reviewing methodologies and content as well as changing the structure of degrees, allowing the high standards of education to be maintained and possibly higher standards to be ensured. •

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