

UK HE sector position on the future of the Bologna Process beyond 2010

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Introduction

1. The UK has been a participating country in the Bologna Process since Higher Education (HE) Ministers from 29 European countries, including the UK, met in Bologna in June 1999 and signed a declaration establishing what was necessary to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by the end of the decade. The UK HE sector has been very much engaged in the Bologna Process, with delegates attending Bologna Process conferences, contributing to Bologna Process Working Groups, responding to EU consultations on education and research issues, and exchanging good practice with other European colleagues. The UK HE sector remains committed to engaging in the Bologna Process and delivering the goals of the EHEA¹.

UK's vision for the EHEA – institutional autonomy

2. The UK HE sector feels very strongly that if European higher education institutions (HEIs) are to be successful in creating the EHEA, European HEIs must have institutional autonomy. HEIs should have the power to decide on the admission of students, set curricula, hire their own staff, establish their own relationships with outside partners and alter their mission and institutional profile as they see fit. Institutional autonomy also implies a readiness to be accountable to both the internal HEI community, both staff and students, and to society as a whole.
3. Other key priorities identified by the UK HE sector include:
 - **diversity of provision** – the diversity of HEIs in Europe is recognised as something valuable and respected;
 - **competition** – HEIs respond to national and global competition for resources, as well as cooperation and collaboration, in a way that fosters innovation and creativity;
 - **student-centred learning with a focus on improving the whole 'student experience'** – whilst maintaining their important teaching and research functions, the primary focus for HEIs will be to facilitate and support

¹ The UK HE sector's High Level Policy Forum (HLPF) approved this UK HE sector position on the future of the Bologna Process beyond 2010 at its meeting in Cardiff in November 2008. The HLPF comprises the executive heads of the HE Funding Councils, GuildHE and Universities UK, National Union of Students (NUS), and UK national and devolved governments. This position paper was agreed alongside the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) document 'The Bologna Process – Looking to the Future – The UK's vision'.

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engaged and active learners to shape their own learning, and to assist them build upon their individual learning styles and experiences;

- **sustainable funding** – HEIs should be adequately funded by national authorities and have the autonomy to attract funding from other non-government sources;
- **links with employers and business** – there is an emphasis on developing and growing existing links with employers and businesses to stimulate knowledge transfer in both directions, and ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to enable them to compete on the jobs market;
- **research** – there is a strategic cross-cutting approach to policy development across the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA). EU decision-makers should build on the successful mechanisms of the Bologna Process in the development of the ERA. The European University Association Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) has an important role to play in this;
- **quality assurance** – HEIs should have the primary responsibility for the quality assurance of their own qualifications, underpinned by robust and transparent national quality assurance processes for external review; and
- **emphasis on outcomes** – Bologna Process stakeholders should continue to set tangible goals for the EHEA and judge the success of the Process accordingly.

UK HE sector position on the future administration of the Process

4. The UK HE sector has consolidated its position on certain core issues around the administration of the Bologna Process:
 - the Process should continue to protect the diversity of HE systems in Europe; it must not homogenise the provision of HE in Europe, rather make it more transparent and accessible;
 - the Process should continue to be based on the strong involvement of key stakeholders: the university sector, through the EUA; colleges and other HEIs through the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE); students through the European Students Union (ESU); and quality assurance organisations through the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA);
 - the engagement of HE Ministers and its politically-driven nature are important factors in the success of the Bologna Process. They have led to a large degree of interest from other governments and HE sectors worldwide. This political engagement should continue to be based on a voluntary, flexible decision-making approach through ministerial meetings;
 - the UK is opposed to any formal legal framework for the EHEA, whether EU or Council of Europe Treaty, which could stifle debate between the 46 participating countries. The introduction of legislation is not a guarantee of successful implementation of reforms; and
 - there should be respect for diversity in national HE contexts and, while setting general targets, Process stakeholders should recognise the disparity in economic and social conditions which could affect implementation timescales.
5. The UK HE sector agrees that a major priority for the next decade should be on ensuring effective implementation of the existing Bologna Process action lines leading to real and measurable

change. Those action lines which have had least attention in the last ten years, or where progress has been slowest, should be prioritised as areas for further development. They represent a substantial continuing programme of work and include:

- recognition of qualifications from inside and outside the EHEA;
- increasing the levels of student and staff mobility; and
- making lifelong learning a reality.

An important element of achieving these goals is the sharing of good practice between countries.

6. The goal of the Bologna Process is to create the EHEA and the priority should be to fulfil existing action lines. The UK HE sector believes that the Bologna Process and its governance arrangements must not be overwhelmed by trying to tackle complex issues that are outside its remit, for example visas, pensions, and staff recruitment. Whilst these issues are important for the future of HE, the effectiveness of the Bologna Process would be diluted if tried to extend itself to cover these issues, and potentially lead to its rejection by national governments.
7. The Bologna Process has led to a restructuring of HE systems across Europe and the creation of new types of qualifications which did not exist before, for example Bachelor and Masters degrees². As a result, Bologna Process stakeholders agree that there should be a renewed focus on explaining the Process reforms to all relevant parties. Particular attention should be paid to employers and to highlighting the employability of graduates from 'new' programmes.

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² The UK already had a Bachelor-Masters-Doctorate structure when the Bologna Process began in 1999 and has had to make fewer changes to its HE infrastructure as a result of the Bologna Process when compared to other European countries.