



CaSE 06/20

The Bologna Process

Response to the inquiry by the Education & Skills Committee of the House of Commons into the Bologna Process.

1. Campaign for Science & Engineering is pleased to submit this response to the Committee's inquiry into the Bologna Process. CaSE is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by over 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers. The views of the membership are represented by an elected Executive Committee.

The implications of a three-phase structure of higher education awards for to one-year Masters and short undergraduate courses (HNCs, HNDs, and Foundation Degrees).

2. The Bologna declaration and other ministerial statements that have followed it seem to have come from largely uninformed political imperatives on the part of politicians of various countries, aimed at satisfying their individual aims regarding public spending pressures rather than at providing international parity of outcomes at various levels of higher education.

3. Many countries contrasted the length of their first cycle qualifications with England's three year bachelor degree and believed that if they cut theirs to the same length, it would address difficulties over their costs of providing higher education.

4. However, they did tend to espouse the 3+2+3 model for bachelor's master's and doctorate. This contrasted with the UK's three or four year bachelor's degree, leading to a one year postgraduate master's level qualification. In the UK, entry to PhD level programmes is also much more flexible, with some people going on directly from a first degree.

5. The UK appeared to ignore the incompatibility of parts of our system with those of other countries, largely reacting (in a somewhat smug way) just to those other countries' desire to align the length of first degrees with ours.

6. This left the UK in a tangle. There would be enormous implications for the cost of higher education provision (both for the state and for the student) if we were to align our system with those of other countries.

7. There are two separate issues here that should not be conflated. There is nothing in Bologna that prevents the UK from operating one year postgraduate and short undergraduate courses. The problem is the nomenclature. We may no longer

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be allowed to award a Masters degree after one year of postgraduate study, or a Bachelor's degree after two years, as for Foundation Degrees.

8. If we believe these courses are useful in their present forms, then we should keep them, and if Bologna makes us change their names, then so be it. At present, for example, while there are one-year postgraduate diplomas (and, of course, the one year Postgraduate Certificate in Education) students prefer to have a Masters degree, especially if some other university is already offering an MA or MSc for much the same time and effort.

9. If, however, all one year courses led to a Diploma or Certificate, these would rapidly become standard and have all the status they needed. It would be quite wrong to abolish some of these courses or needlessly to extend them to two years, merely to comply with the Bologna two-year requirement for a Masters degree, and it is unnecessary - and quite possibly futile - to try to negotiate exemptions for them. Much the same applies to the Foundation Degree, HNC and HND.

Awareness and engagement in the Bologna process within HEIs

10. For many continental universities, the most awkward problem they have had to solve is the move to the three-year first degree. This has not been a problem in the UK, even in Scotland. Because of this, however, there has been a tendency not to look carefully enough at the changes that will have to be made, and this can lead to unnecessary problems. In such situations as this, it is very important to consult widely and at an early stage, because any proposed change can cause problems that will not be anticipated except by people working in the area in which they will occur.

11. For example, the details of the implementation of the credit framework were largely left to "credit consortia", most of whose members were administrators. They imposed the requirement that students have to pass every module. This seems logical enough and it is what happens in many other systems, but students in the UK, especially in science and engineering have not traditionally been expected to do this, providing they demonstrated overall competence in their subject. Such students would now be deemed to have failed.

12. There are a number of ways of avoiding this outcome while complying with the requirements of a credit framework, but universities are having to devise them late in the day and after the details of the framework have been decided. Naturally, they are not all choosing the same solution. Had there been more widespread discussion of the Bologna process at an earlier stage, a more satisfactory and preferable nationwide scheme could have been agreed.

Opportunities to enhance the mobility of students from the UK

13. The chief barrier to mobility from the UK is language. Too few UK students can speak a European language well enough to study in it, and because English is more and more the international *lingua franca*, there is a much greater incentive for others to come to the UK and improve their English than for UK students to go abroad.

14. There is, however, a need for more UK graduates to be able to speak other languages, and measures should be taken to encourage this. The most important would be to improve and extend language teaching in schools, but universities could also include more language teaching in undergraduate courses.

15. The greater standardisation of courses will obviously make it easier for UK students to study abroad. In particular, it will be easier for them to spend a year or even a semester in another country. This would also be easier if UK degrees were less highly specialised than at present; perhaps the longer time envisaged between the first cycle degree and the PhD will lead to this.

The possible implementation of a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and a focus on learning outcomes and competencies

16. The ECTS is based on the number of hours of study. This is already causing difficulties in the UK, where learning outcomes and competencies have always been more important. The European system is much easier to operate in a very large and diverse system, but it leads to all sorts of anomalies. How much this matters depends on how much common sense people and institutions are prepared to use, and how much they are constrained by regulations.

17. If, for example, levels of pay are determined by the level of qualification that a person has, then there will be an incentive for people to go for those that actually reflect less in the way of learning outcomes and competences. This would be rather like the effect of league tables on the choice of GCSEs.

18. This question highlights a possibly serious problem. The ECTS is based on the number of hours of study and not on learning outcomes and competencies. This makes it different from, for example, many current UK vocational qualifications. The ECTS is easier to operate in a very large and diverse system but employers and others will have to recognise it for what it is, a very indirect and imprecise statement of a person's knowledge and skills. The ECTS should not be used as a qualification entitling a person to take certain jobs, be admitted to certain courses, or be paid more for doing the same work as a nominally less qualified colleague.

19. The solution might appear to be to standardise programmes so that credits at the same level do reflect more closely comparable knowledge and skills. Some movement in this direction would be both possible and desirable, but it would be wrong to make programmes less fit for purpose in the name of standardisation, especially when even at level 4 (first cycle university) half the age group is involved.

20. There is already a wide difference between courses in the same subject at different UK universities. This is essential if they are to suit the different students who attend them and it does not cause serious problems as long as all those concerned understand the situation.

Quality Assurance systems in HE (teaching and research): the compatibility of UK proposals and Bologna

21. At all costs we must avoid reintroducing the intrusive, time-consuming, expensive and (as it turned out) largely useless scheme that was imposed on the universities in the recent past.

Degree classification reform in light of Bologna

22. The advantage of the degree classification is that it provides a short and widely understood summary of how well a student did: "a class X degree in subject Y at university Z". That is as much information as most employers and others want to know, and if they need more, they can get it, because students can obtain detailed transcripts of their record.

23. Over the years, however, courses in most UK universities have become modular. It has become more and more difficult to compare the programmes of study of different students. Student/staff ratios have increased to the point where examiners cannot be sufficiently confident of their knowledge of the students to do more than convert marks into classes of degree by some algorithm. In any case, the great pressure for transparency has made it difficult for examiners to do anything else.

24. Degree classification would probably have been replaced by some form of grade point average even without Bologna; if there is pressure from Bologna to do this, we should not oppose it.

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