The Bologna Process from the Perspective of the University of Applied Sciences Giessen-Friedberg

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Abstract
According to the Bologna-Declaration, the European universities agreed to install a new study system of Bachelor and Master courses by 2010. The paper describes the German experiences with this process from the point of view of the University of Applied Sciences Giessen-Friedberg (Hassia, Germany).

Keywords
Bologna-Declaration, Bachelor- and Master-Studies, European Credit Transfer System, International student exchange

Introduction
In June 1999, the representatives of 29 European countries enacted the so-called „Declaration of Bologna“. It describes the harmonisation of study forms and conditions in Higher Education among the individual member states and is intended to create a joint European Higher Education Area.

The idea of a joint European Higher Education Area was already formulated a year before on the occasion of the Paris Meeting of Education Ministers of France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Germany.

In May 2001 in Prague, the meanwhile 32 participating European Education Ministers then confirmed their intent to establish a joint European Higher Education Area by the year 2010.

The „Bologna-Process“ was implemented at different speeds in the various countries and was, in part, accompanied by intense discussions about the sense of such a reform and with regard to its detailed implementation.

This article is a retrospective, an attempt to evaluate the successes, but also the setbacks in the Bologna-Process, viewed from the angle of a German, to be precise: a Hassian University of Applied Sciences on the cusp of the year 2010.

1 Bologna - Process
By introducing the Bologna Process ten years ago, a joint European Higher Education Area was intended. There was the hope to achieve a better comparability of degree courses and study contents as well as an increase in inner-European student mobility.

The central element of this process was the changeover to a two-stage study system with the typical Anglo-Saxon degrees „Bachelor“ and „Master“. This changeover was to be implemented by the year 2010 in order to provide comparable cross-European graduation degrees.
1.1 Reasons for the Study Reform

The transformation process of European Universities was mainly intended to increase their efficiency by achieving comparable graduation degrees and thereby promoting a European Higher Education Area. But the initiators also intended to establish a European market for university academics and to create a counterbalance to the North American Education Area and to the North American job market. But there were also certain financial aspects in play, which were not overtly pronounced.

In Western countries more and more young people aim for higher education. In Germany, for example, the number of students increased from quarter million in the Sixties to over two millions today. The proportion of potential students of a year-group is increasing continuously. On the other hand, as the former President of the German University Rectors Conference (HRK) explained in 1999, “no society in the world needs 40% of scientists in each year-group. Therefore, a two-stage degree system offers the opportunity to improve Higher Education and to enhance international comparability at the same time”.

The typical German cycle of Basic Studies and Specialised Studies with a regular University degree course duration of five years, and in some cases longer, was judged to have a negative influence on the economy as it does not serve modern demands. A shorter, and thereby for the government financially more favourable study cycle (the Anglo-Saxon Bachelor degree) was thought to serve the big demand for Higher Education. The Master cycle, however, was projected to serve a selection of Bachelor students who could then continue their studies and form the elite in the traditional sense.

In Germany, the financial aspect of the reform lead to the attempt to link the changeover of the study system with the charging of tuition fees for Higher Education, or at least for Master degrees, and was therefore a new development in Germany as, so far, University education was free of tuition fees in the past.

1.2 Pillars of the Study Reform

The most important reforms of the Bologna-Process can be summarised as follows:

- The creation of a harmonised study system which consists of two subsequent study cycles, both leading up to a professional degree. The first cycle (Bachelor) has a regular duration of 6 to 8 semesters, the second cycle (Master) 2 to 4 semesters, i.e. a Master degree comprises 10 semesters of studies
- The modular structure of subjects and the introduction of „Credit Points“ based on the course contents and the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), enabling European comparability of subjects and easier transfers among universities
- The introduction of the „Diploma Supplement“ documenting the study contents with the purpose of serving comparability of university degrees and improving and promoting the graduate mobility on the European job market.

2 The Bologna Process at the University of Applied Sciences Giessen-Friedberg

For Hassian Universities, among these also the University of Applied Sciences Giessen-Friedberg, the reform meant a complete restructuring of the former one-cycle study system. This was not an easy task, as the phasing-out of the old system had to take place parallel to the introduction of the new two-cycle study system. In addition, many university members doubted the sense of the reform.

Therefore, some universities and faculties postponed the reforms. If they couldn’t defy the reform, they could at least postpone its introduction to the last possible moment. This is why only 35% of all degree courses at German Universities had been reformed by the summer semester of 2006, whereas 55% of the degree courses at Universities of Applied Sciences had already completed their changeover.

In Hassia, an additional aggravation of the situation resulted from the introduction of tuition fees (500 Euro per semester) in 2007. After fierce student protests, tuition fees were abandoned again a year later. In comparison to all other German states, the state of Hassia, together with Baden-Wuerttemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia, were among the last German states to implement the study reform. With regard to reform implementation, the states Berlin, Brandenburg and Bremen could be called the pioneers.

In 2004, the Senate of the University of Applied Sciences Giessen-Friedberg concluded the following recommendations with reference to the introduction of Bachelor- and Master degrees:

- The University aims for a coherent structure of Bachelor- and Master degree courses among all Hassian Universities of Applied Sciences
- In terms of course duration, a preference is given for a regular first cycle of 7 semesters (Bachelor) and regular second cycle of 3 semesters (Master)
- Bachelor degree courses should contain an obligatory practical professional phase in their 7th semester
- The design of Bachelor and Master curricula should contain a minimum of 15% general subjects (law, business administration, languages, soft skills).

2.1 The chosen Bachelor-Master structures

The changeover to a two-stage study cycle at the University of Applied Sciences began in the non-technical degree courses, respectively degree courses with little engineering contents such as
Business Administration, Hospital Management, Environmental Studies and Biotechnology.

The engineering degree courses Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering followed later with a Bachelor cycle of 7 semesters and a Master cycle of 3 semesters.

A harmonised structure in over 50 degree courses could not be agreed upon. Many degree courses (Business Administration, Computer Sciences, Architecture and Civil Engineering) decided to divide their cycles into a Bachelor degree of 6 semesters and a Master cycle in 4 semesters.

Meanwhile, most faculties have completed their changeover to the Bachelor cycle and have collected first experiences.

2.2 State of the Art in the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information & Communications Technology (EI)

Beginning winter semester 2009/2010, the Faculty EI introduced three 7-semester Bachelor degree courses: Automation Technology, Electronics as well as Information & Communications Technology.

At present, the „Diplom“ degree courses are offered parallel to the Bachelor degree courses to enable the students enrolled in the former system to complete their degree as planned. New enrolments in “Diplom” courses, though, are no longer possible.

Since 2005, the Faculty of Electrical Engineering offers the international Master degree course Information and Communications Engineering (M.Sc.) taught in English language which is also addressed to engineering students from abroad. A Master degree course in Automation Technology is in preparation to be accredited in the next three years.

3 Critical Evaluation of the Study Reform in Germany

More and more German Education Institutes as well as professors and students are critical of the implementation of the Bologna Reform.

The Universities criticise, that the State did not provide sufficient financial means to deal with the intended improvement of student mentoring, while student numbers are on the rise and the cycle changeover is in process.

The students mainly criticise that the newly audited Bachelor degree courses are predominantly:

- overloaded in terms of curriculum and workload and seem to be too prescriptive so that there is little room for intellectual curiosity
- too much compulsory attendance and a very high examination density

which leads to excessive demands on students, allows no time for working in part-time jobs (which again are needed for financing their studies) and therefore leads to the question, whether it is possible to maintain Bachelor degree studies. According to the German University Information System (HIS), the drop-out rates in technical bachelor degree courses have indeed increased, but have decreased in the Humanities. Other weaknesses mentioned by the students are:

- insufficient possibilities for specialisation
- problems in the recognition of earned credits which were obtained at other universities
- insufficient university exchange programmes with foreign universities in order to improve student mobility

which puts into question the objectives which the new system should explicitly improve: the planning of an individual study programme by way of module selection, student mobility in form of studies or internships abroad in order to gain international experience.

According to HIS, only 15% of all bachelor students accomplish a semester abroad whereas 24% in the former „Diplom“ system and 34% in the former Magister Artium degree courses chose to study a semester abroad.

Furthermore, also the number of places in Master degree courses is judged to be insufficient.

For these reasons, in autumn 2009 student protests took place in some European countries which are directed towards the reform, respectively its implementation. In Germany, this wave of protests spread over 50 universities from Freiburg to Berlin.

4 Summary and Conclusions

When the Education Ministers decided upon the Bologna Reform in 1999 and left 10 years for its implementation, the goal was a well organised and well mentored study course with a small drop-out rate. It was meant to lead to efficient studies with practical experience and improved European student mobility, followed by a swift career entry.

But obviously not everything went as well as projected.

The Bologna process was and will continue to be a top-down study reform, politically wanted and prescribed. It now shows, that it is a drawback, that the persons who have to implement the reform, were not involved and informed enough from the beginning.

The Universities criticise the insufficient financial provisions for the implementation of the reform. The students complain about their overloaded timetables, which don’t offer time slots for full studies or a necessary part-time job. They ask for a better access to study places in Master courses and for studies without tuition fees.

It seems as if the Bologna reform needs a post-reform, as no side is interested in a failure of this process.