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Epidemiology and the Bologna Saga

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Abstract. This paper discusses the driving forces behind the Bologna process, its advantages and possible negative effects. It also analyses the dangers that may result in commoditisation of the European higher education systems, in emergence of rigid accreditation systems and of a centralised bureaucracy that will impair innovation and creativity. The paper develops the idea that the Bologna process may be interpreted as a step in the neo-liberal movement to decrease the social responsibility of the state by shortening the length of pre-graduate studies and transferring responsibility for supporting employability to individuals through graduate studies. Consideration is also given to the mechanisms and forces behind the Bologna process that try to present an apparent climate of consensus despite some obvious difficulties and disagreements at the level of implementation.

Keywords: Bologna declaration, diversity, European accreditation, globalisation, higher education systems

Introduction

World-institutionalists seek to explain the emergence of institutional and organisational similarity across social systems in a growing number of countries by developing the argument that universal norms and culture shape national policies. Others argue that globalisation, particularly in the field of higher education, is increasingly discussed on the basis of its economic relevance and managerial effectiveness.

A by-product of globalisation is the emergence of a 'new regionalism' stemming from the creation of macro regions like the EU. Thus the Bologna process can be interpreted as a strategy to increase higher education's relevance to economy. This paper discusses the driving forces behind the Bologna process, its advantages and possible negative effects. It also analyses the dangers that may result in commoditisation of the European higher education systems, in emergence of rigid accreditation systems and of a centralised bureaucracy that will kill innovation and creativity.

The paper also develops the idea that the Bologna process may be interpreted as another step in the neo-liberal movement to decrease the social responsibility of the state by shortening the length of pre-graduate studies and transferring responsibility for supporting employability to individuals through graduate studies: in essence converting education into a private good.

Finally consideration is given to the mechanisms and forces behind the Bologna process that try to present an apparent climate of consensus despite some obvious difficulties and disagreements at the level of implementation.

Some of the ideas put forward in this paper do not follow the fashionable trend of uncritical acceptance of the benefits of Bologna, and could be dismissed as manifestations of outmoded Jacobinism. However, the authors consider themselves Europeans and have a dream of a Europe where innovation will prevail, diversity will be protected, and the rich cultural characteristics of the EU Member States will be preserved. They imagine a new European Renaissance, a Europe "*de l'esprit*" where universities will play a major role now that the prince is no longer present to support the arts. Except in nightmares, they do not dream of a Europe of commissions and committees, rules and regulations, or multinational bureaucracies. Is it likely that these dreams will come true?

Globalisation and national trends in higher education

Over the last twenty years 'world institutionalists'[1] (e.g., Meyer et al. 1997; Finnemore 1996), in order to explain the emergence of a remarkable institutional and organisational similarity in the social systems of countries throughout the world, have argued that the institutions of the nation-state, including the state itself, are moulded at a supranational level by the dominant values and processes of the Western ideology rather than being autonomous and specific national creations. This perspective builds on the idea that universal norms and culture shape national policies and the political action of nation states. Transnational actors such as UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, and the IMF are central to the propagation of worldwide patterns and trends in the field of education. This is particularly true with regard to curricular categories and the relationship model between the state and higher education. The perspective that de-regulation of state systems, including the introduction of private higher education, may increase the respon-

siveness of higher education institutions (HEIs) to environmental pressures and may improve the over-all efficiency of higher education systems is also part of the new gospel sermonised by supranational agencies (see, for instance, World Bank 1994). From a world-institutionalist point of view national education policies are, to use Dale's own words, "little more than the playing out of versions of scripts that are informed by, and receive their legitimation from world level ideologies, values and cultures" (Dale 2000, p. 4). For instance, Fuller and Rubinson (1992) explain the worldwide spread of the 'education system' idea on the argument that globalisation acts on education through a universalistic culture and transnational actors.

Dale argues against this approach claiming that globalisation, namely as it applies to education, is not a mere reflection of the Western education culture (cognitively based upon values and norms that spread worldwide) but rather "a set of political-economic arrangements for the organisation of the global economy, driven by the need to retain the capitalist system rather than any set of values" (Dale 2000, p. 10).

Whatever the perspective, either the world institutionalists' or Dale's, it is obvious that present political trends of higher education cannot be fully explained solely on the basis of national specificities. On the other hand, the rise of transnational trends like massification, cost recovery, regulation through de-regulation, entrepreneurialism and managerialism, increasing stratification of higher education systems, and increasing separation between the research and teaching functions, cannot be explained strictly from a world institutionalist perspective. There are significant correspondences between the changes of political, institutional and academic patterns and the changing patterns of production, distribution and consumption.[2] International trends often function as legitimating sources for national policies (Dale 2000, p.11), and OECD reports, Word Bank and IMF advice (or forceful advice), UNESCO surveys and EU convergence pressures usually act far beyond their explicit claims. The important influence of these transnational actors has been notably evident in Portugal. The World Bank's loan 1559-PO to Portugal had a very strong influence in shaping the higher education system. Changes such as the establishment of a transitional year at grade 12 level, the establishment of Colleges for Teacher Training, and the establishment of 2–4 year post-secondary technical training institutes (later giving rise to the Polytechnic sub-system) were all the result of recommendations made by the World Bank (World Bank 1977; 1978; 1979).

Ball (1998, pp. 119–130) explains the dissemination of these 'universal' influences internationally in two ways. First using what Popkewitz (1996) calls the 'international circulation of ideas' where some countries act as laboratories for political reform. The UK and New Zealand were leaders in the introduction of neo-liberal policies that later were copied by other countries and used as examples by international agencies. Makerere university in Uganda is often cited by the World Bank as the model for the 'African Entrepreneurial University'. Chile was used as a laboratory by Milton Friedman and the noteworthy Chicago Boys. As Ball adds, ''in some contexts this movement 'carries' ideas and creates a kind of cultural and political dependency which works to devalue or deny the feasibility of 'local solutions'.'' (Ball 1998, p. 123).

The second has been interpreted by Levin (1988) using a medical metaphor. He draws an analogy between the present education policy transfers and the spread of a disease, where international experts, policy entrepreneurs, and representatives of organisations selling tailor-made miraculous solutions for national problems are the analogues of infectious agents moving from country to country looking for suitable hosts to be infected.

Seen from both a cultural and economic point of view, 'globalisation' is a concept that may enrich the analysis of the higher education evolution trends but it is not the unique determinant of this evolution. Globalisation is often presented as a fact or a process that cannot be avoided: the only road to universal prosperity, which is associated with erosion of national borders and weakening of the role of national governments. However, the 'neoliberal vision of a globalised market utopia' (Rupert 2000) instead of promoting a universal move to world prosperity, it has on the contrary ''led to an increase in the gap between the richest and the poorest, and the effects of the pursuit of a pure market economy has led to a value system based on exclusion and inequality'' (Porter 1999, p. 31). Consequently, the inevitability of globalisation, at least under its present form, is increasingly being questioned.

Some authors affirm that globalisation does not mean that national variations do not remain strong and question the homogeneous nature of the world culture and its models. Increasing transnational influence does not annihilate power relations between countries, or the state's sovereignty, which though mitigated, remains an important arena of political agency. Boyer and Drache, using the instability of financial markets as an example of the limits of governance in the absence of state intervention, conclude that ''the idea that global markets will totally

erode the legitimacy, indeed, necessity of the nation-state does not stand up to scrutiny.'' (Boyer and Drache 1996, p. 8).

Indeed, countries seem to be doing 'similar things, but on closer examination they are not as similar as it first appeared' (Halpin and Troyna 1995). There are strong local and national characteristics that play against uniformity. On the other hand,

> The logic of globalisation tolerates, indeed requires, the promotion of cultural (and possibly political) difference and diversity. Globalisation will build on diversity and needs to work through patterns that seem paradoxical – both global and decentred – forms of social organisation which convey powerful symbolic images of choice, freedom and diversity. (Jones 1998, pp. 149–150)

A by-product of the neo-liberal economic globalisation is the emergence of a 'new regionalism' (Acharya 2001) which results from the creation of macro regions (e.g., the European Union, NAFTA, Mercosur and Asian Pacific) ''even if in many cases they are loose spatial units with some political and cultural bonds, however varied, tenuous, and sometimes conflitual'' (Mittelman 1996, p. 6). However, only the European Union has so far initiated a visible intervention in higher education systems. An analysis of the consequences of this intervention will be presented in this paper.

The Bologna declaration and its objectives

In Europe nowadays there is an evident trend in favour of converging national higher education systems. In the wake of the Sorbonne Declaration (25th May 1998), which emphasised the creation of the European area of higher education as a mechanism for promoting the mobility of students and academics as well as the employability of European citizens and Europe's overall development, 29 education ministers signed the Bologna Declaration (19th June 1999) stating their willingness to co-ordinate policies in order to achieve[3] the following objectives:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement […].
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate.
- Establishment of a system of credits […] as a means of promoting the most widespread student mobility.

- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movements.
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regard to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research (Bologna Declaration 1999).

Independently of the strength and importance that this political artefact may presently have, it is only a declaration and not a treaty or a directive. International trends and tendencies can be activated by other means than explicit declarations. In other words 'convergence' could be implemented with or without the Bologna Declaration.

The merits of the Bologna Declaration objectives do not give rise to controversy. The Declaration also provides a good opportunity for European countries to debate the issue of higher education's international diversity/homogeneity by initiating the explicit discussion of an important national and international political issue: the perceived need to make European higher education 'comparable',[4] while at the same time providing the occasion to reinforce perspectives on European policy-making within limits imposed by the safeguard of national specificities.

The Declaration refers as basic arguments in favour of greater comparability of higher education systems, the recognition that knowledge:

- it is an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth;
- it is an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich European citizenship;
- it is capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space;
- [and that the adoption of such systems will] 'promote European citizens' employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system. (Bologna Declaration 1999).

However, neither the driving forces behind the Bologna process nor its advantages or consequences are very clear. To claim that employers need a more transparent view of prospective employees' academic degrees does not seem to be a good enough reason. In the new globalised economy employers hire and fire personnel all over the world with remarkable ease. Irish or Portuguese engineers are hired by multinationals (being

fired if they are not good enough) without any visible problem. Indian experts in computer sciences are employed by American companies, while the UK hires physicians and nurses from former colonies.

The mobility of students across Europe might be another reason for convergence. Some EU funded programmes such as Erasmus and Tempus were used to promote the student mobility across the EU despite the lack of convergence of the higher education systems at the time of their implementation. However, the number of students in those programmes remained well bellow the initial target of 10% of the students in the Union "which, incidentally, was precisely the number of students studying abroad in Europe of the early 17th century" (Neave 2002, p. 11). It is somewhat cynical to reinforce a commitment to mobility when the Commission has cancelled the funds available for student mobility while some European countries are replacing grants by loans. It is true that there are yet some obstacles to student mobility because of the traditional bigotry of many HEIs when confronted with the formal recognition of periods of study spent in a different HEI, especially if it belongs to the same country. But is it a good enough reason to initiate a process that may prove to be another expensive, bureaucratic and time-consuming exercise? Apparently, forcing universities to complement their thinning budgets with full-cost fees from overseas students has been a good enough incentive for institutions to take a much more flexible view (sometimes even too flexible) of the recognition of prior learning periods.

At last there is the argument of competition. Some of the more neoliberal minded enthusiasts support the idea of making Europe competitive by creating a European Area of Higher Education, but who is going to take advantage of this market? Europe's capacity to attract foreign students is reduced by several factors such as different languages, immigration problems, and poor marketing. The HEIs also lack adequate financial incentives (most countries, with few exceptions where pressure is put on HEIs to complement their budgets by selling education services, still see this as an activity to help developing countries, not as a tool to further explore them).

Possible dangers of the Bologna process

Despite its noble objectives, the Bologna process raises some questions about its possible contribution to the loss of autonomy of HEIs and the emergence of a new centralised European Higher Education bureaucracy. In what follows some of these negative aspects are analysed.

Decrease of diversity

An obvious danger is a decrease of the European Higher Education systems' diversity, until very recently considered one of Europe's competitive advantages. It is interesting to notice that IRDAC although recognising that "the significant variations in European education systems (in terms of numbers, quality and organisation) can be a source of cultural enrichment, and indeed a source of innovation" (IRDAC 1994, p. 29), also agrees that increased transparency may result in demand-driven convergence of educational outputs,[5] and clearly states that "… the Maastricht Treaty, moreover, has given a solid platform for action at European level, with explicit reference to quality improvement in education and training" (*ibid*).

This raises a fundamental question: can diversity be protected by the principle of subsidiarity or, on the contrary, will the need for more transparency result in the implementation of European systems of quality/accreditation contributing to decreasing diversity of the higher education systems throughout Europe?

There are some indications that the Bologna process might go beyond the limits set by its declaration of intents that carefully avoids the use of the word 'harmonisation'. For instance, in the minutes of a board meeting of the former CRE[6] it is suggested that CRE should test if the main disciplines taught in European higher education could not be built around a European core curriculum. This is a very interesting development. Not very long ago there was a movement away from a system of State control, where curricula were centrally established by ministerial bureaucrats or by more traditional academics (when academic oligarchy prevailed), to a system of State supervision with increased university autonomy. At present, one sees CRE/EUA itself exploring the possibility of more uniform, centrally defined (by a new academic oligarchy with a European dimension?) European core curricula!

Another indication comes from the project 'Tuning Educational Structures in Europe' that was launched on 4th May 2001, with financial support from the Commission. The Tuning project sought to:

- 'Tune' educational structures in Europe, and thereby aid the development of the European Higher Education Area.
- Open up a debate on the nature and importance of subject-specific and general competences, involving all stakeholders, including academics, graduates and employers.

- Identify and exchange information on common subject-based reference points, curricula content, learning outcomes and methods of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Improve European co-operation and collaboration in the development of the quality, effectiveness and transparency of European higher education by examining ECTS credits and other suitable devices to enhance progress.

'Tuning' made an important declaration of intents: it did not seek

> to develop any sort of unified, prescriptive, or definitive European curricula; to create any rigid set of subject specifications designed to restrict or direct the content, delivery or nature of European higher education; nor to end the rich diversity of European education, restrict the independence of academics and subject specialists, or damage local and national academic autonomy.
> (http://odour.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/documents.asp, p. 25)

However, Andrée Sursock takes a rather cautious view:

> There is, however, a temptation that I would urge governments to resist: that the results of such discussions end up as a blueprint for evaluations. The attending risk is to prevent change in the name of standards and that, once these are codified, they will lag hopelessly behind state of the art knowledge. (Sursock 2002, p. 45)

Indeed, one may wonder if 'Tuning' will not open a door to some kind of 'strong harmonisation' or even 'uniformity'. Two examples taken from Tuning's final report will support this remark. First, in the area of Chemistry eight compulsory theory modules are defined (Physics, Mathematics, General Chemistry, Analytical Chemistry, Inorganic Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, Physical Chemistry and Biological Chemistry), each with minimum credits attached, and this is followed by a recommendation of credits for semi-optional modules. On subject knowledge outcomes 14 main aspects are defined, ranging from states of matter to quantum mechanics, from thermodynamics to kinetics including catalysis, from aliphatic, aromatic, heterocyclic and organometallic compounds to macromolecules, from synthetic organic chemistry to chemical analysis, etc. (http://odour.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/line2.asp, pp. 36–43). When this is combined with recommendations about accreditation, one runs the risk of unleashing strong pressures towards more uniformity. Second, for the area of mathematics 'Tuning' recommends that programme accreditation include universities fulfilling

the requirements of the core curriculum by checking a list of contents, a list of skills and the level of the mastery of concepts. It clearly states:

> we believe that large deviations from the standard (such as a $3+1$ structure) should be grounded in appropriate entry level requirements, or other programme specific factors, which can be judged by external accreditation. Otherwise, such degrees risk not benefiting from the automatic European recognition provided by a common framework, even though they may constitute worthy higher education degrees. (http://odour.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/line2.asp, pp. 27–28)

It is obvious that this kind of recommendation will increase the pressure for institutions to adopt a more uniform structure. These two examples are just a demonstration that universities may run the risk of being caught in a bureaucratic network that will have a negative effect on programme diversity and institutional autonomy. In the words of André Sursock, what one needs is "to create a common structure for degrees and to define level indicators for the BA/MA but in a way that will not stifle learning, learners and teachers" (Sursock 2002, p. 45).

Commoditisation of higher education

Recent trends show an emergence of new education policies "which tie together individual, consumer choice in education markets with rhetorics aimed at furthering national economic interests" (Ball 1998, p. 125), and this results in "an increasing colonisation of education policy by economic policy imperatives" (*ibid*) where "buying an education becomes a substitute for getting an education" (Kenway et al. 1993, p. 116) that transforms students into clients. The strong demands for the university to become 'relevant', the increasing relationship between education and economic success, and the predominance of the market's orthodoxy are transforming higher education.

The United States' recent proposal to the World Trade Organisation to consider education as a tradable service or commodity represents another large step in the process of commoditisation of higher education and may create a strong market competition that could endanger the core values of the university. If the Bologna's convergence process gets out of control of academics and becomes a feud of European bureaucracy, then one may well see a process of homogenisation and this represents another factor endangering the traditional role of the

European universities. Van Weigl *a propos* of the American situation defines commoditisation as

> the process whereby products or services become standardized to the extent that their attributes are roughly the same. (…)when a product or a service is commoditised, it can be readily compared with other products like it, and competition revolves strictly around the price of the good. (Van Weigl 2000, p. 14)

He alerts institutions to the fact that:

> Colleges and universities are sitting ducks when it comes to their most lucrative source of tuition revenue – their undergraduate core curriculum. A 1997 Coopers and Lybrand white paper, ''The transformation of Higher education in the Digital Age'', estimated that 80% of the total enrolments in undergraduate core curricula were concentrated in just 25 courses (such as Calculus, Biology and Western Civilization). There is so remarkable a similarity in the content of such core courses that a company named Final-exam.com is preparing generic study guides for freshmen and sophomore college courses that students can access online. (Van Weigl 2000, p. 14)

There is some danger that the convergence of European HE systems might lead to commoditisation of education. Instead of reinforcing European HEIs' capacities to compete in other continents, convergence might create a huge and appealing market for non-European organisations, and for profit oriented commercial led activities in Europe.

Towards a European accreditation system?

Accreditation is another recurring theme of the Bologna process. Two years ago the then-CRE launched an exploratory project on accreditation as a way to deal with the internationalisation of higher education. The main conclusions of the project were presented in Lisbon in February 2001 during a 'Validation Seminar' – Towards accreditation schemes for higher education in Europe?[7] During the seminar those conclusions opening the way to accreditation of study programmes were challenged by a large majority of participants. Curiously, the written conclusions of the seminar conveyed to the Salamanca Convention of European Higher Education Institutions, indicated that

> representatives of higher education institutions, as well as student organisations, quality assurance agencies, national higher education

> authorities and intergovernmental bodies discussed accreditation as a possible option for higher education in Europe, particularly as a contribution to the completion of the European higher education area called for in the Bologna Declaration. (Message from the Salamanca convention, 29–30 March 2001)

and completely ignored the fact that the majority of participants strongly opposed any idea of moving to a system of accreditation.

At Salamanca another attempt at accreditation was made and once more the majority of the universities present at the Convention rejected it. The international press[8] present at Salamanca refers that accreditation was a hot topic of debate[9] and the Report to the Ministers of Education assembled in Prague clearly states that no consensus on accreditation had been possible:

> Accreditation, in spite of the differences in concept, is a public statement, recognising that a given institution or programme fulfils a given set of reference standards. The reference standards may be defined at national or international level and external to the institution of higher education. The question of who is responsible for setting the reference standards has proved to be a delicate and controversial one, especially if it is considered at European level. Alongside those that firmly believe in accreditation, even at European level, there are those that fear externally imposed European standards, as inadequate to their national system or reality and a restriction to the institutional capacity to innovate. (Lourtie 2001, p.16)

However, the final conclusions of the Salamanca Convention of European Higher Education Institutions conveyed to Prague indicate that, ''The way into the future will be to design mechanisms at European level for the mutual acceptance of quality assurance outcomes, with 'accreditation' as one possible option''. On the contrary, the final Communiqué of the Higher Education ministers assembled in Prague avoids any reference to a European system of quality/accreditation.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of accrediting study programmes? At the CRE's Utrecht conference of 1991, Van Vught proposed that a European system of quality assessment could be designed along the lines of the United States' accreditation system, with multiple accreditation agencies to avoid ''the bureaucratic monopoly of some new European higher education agency'' (Van Vught 1991, pp. 81–82). He referred to the advantage of a 'market-like situation' in which the insti-

tutions and the agencies both have some freedom of choice. In this system institutions could also build "quality networks of institutions with related missions and accredited by the same accrediting agencies" (*ibid*), emphasising specific objectives and standards.

The US is probably the country with the longest accreditation tradition, at both the institutional and programme levels, and it is frequently presented as the prototype of a diversified higher education system (Teichler 1988) where the market plays a dominant role while the federal government is absent from the system's regulation. In the US, diversity is mainly institutional, not programmatic. The American higher education system includes a diverse array of institutions, ranging from some of the world's best research universities (research universities represent about 2% of the total number of institutions) to some very modest community colleges. A system of institutional accreditation by regional private agencies uses 'fitness for purpose' criteria by taking into account each institution's mission statement, in order to protect this large institutional diversity both in terms of size and of quality (El-Khawas 1993). The Carnegie Foundation (1987) states that the US is proud of the diversity of their higher education system, formed by a very rich range of institutions which serve a variety of needs.

Recently, the American accreditation system has come under cristicism. Dill et al. (1996) writing about institutional self-regulation in the US cast doubts about the adequacy of current processes and standards of the US academic accreditation, and they refer to the failure of voluntary accreditation to remove the deficiencies of collegial mechanisms of educational quality assurance. This is also the opinion of Martin Trow

> To a considerable extent, external academic accountability in the US, mainly in the form of accreditation, has been irrelevant to the improvement of higher education; in some cases it has acted more to shield institutions from effective monitoring of their own educational performance than to provide it; in still other cases it distinctly hampers the efforts of institutions to improve themselves. It encourages institutions to report their strengths rather than their failures – and even to conceal their weaknesses and failures from view. (Trow 1996, p. 316)

Elaine El-Khawas (1993) has described some traditional areas of weakness of the accreditation system, such as the 'accommodationalist' approach of judging an institution entirely in terms of its chosen mission, and the poor quality of evidence presented by the institutions for

accrediting. This results from the need to acknowledge differences in institutional type and mission within a very diversified system and is the main reason why Adelman and Silver (1990, p. 2) consider that "in these circumstances, neither professional or institutional accreditation bodies would claim to have developed immutable measures of quality".

To solve these difficulties, Dill et al. recommend that the route to quality assurance should combine "a mutually reinforcing system of institution-based quality assessments of teaching and learning and a coordinated regional system of external academic audits" (Dill et al. 1996, p. 24). Martin Trow (1994) considers that the culture of excellence has been always present in the great research universities, even when the whole frenzy of quality assessment was absent from the political agenda. Those elite institutions were able, throughout their history, to establish strong internal quality control procedures that ensured they would remain leading research universities. And Martin Trow adds that the most appropriate role of outside supranational, governmental or quasi-governmental quality agencies will consist of "monitoring and encouraging the emergence of this culture [of excellence] in institutions of mass higher education, but not through 'evaluations' based on uniform criteria and linked to funding" (Trow 1994, p. 39). Trow's recommendation is much more consistent with 'quality audit' than with quality assessment or accreditation (Amaral 2001). He also recommends "that we transform accreditation from external reviews of institutional quality into searching audits of each institution's own scheme for critical self-examination, its own internal quality control procedures" (Trow 1996, p. 316).

Several authors thus recommend that in the US the responsibility of creating the necessary mechanisms for quality assessment and quality improvement should lie with each and every institution: Outside independent agencies, such as the already existing six regional accrediting associations, should instead assume the role of meta-evaluating or auditing.

At present, the US accreditation system is moving towards an audit system. Introducing expanded use of academic audits in accreditation review has focused additional attention on improving the teaching, learning and review processes needed to maintain quality. Redesign of accreditation standards has reduced the investment of institutional or programme time in activities generally associated with quality assurance like fewer reports or less required evidence as well as freed institutions and programmes to concentrate on developing improvement strategies for a number of institution or programme functions. Focused accredi-

tation reviews have enabled the institution or programme to devote more attention to a single area such as improving the undergraduate curriculum, distance learning or professional education in a particular field.

In Europe there is huge programmatic diversity (different degree structures, different duration of studies, different access systems, etc.) but institutional diversity is much lower than in the US. Many of the American higher education institutions would not be regarded as 'higher education' in Europe. By moving to a 'converged' European higher education system, Europe will destroy much of the programmatic diversity without increasing institutional diversity.

Whatever the reasons, a Human Capital view of higher education as an indispensable ingredient for European competitiveness or concern about the persistent social class imbalance in higher education, there is a recent but growing European preoccupation with more inclusive higher education systems. This means that higher education institutions are being asked to admit students from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a variety of learning needs. To match this increased student diversity, Europe needs a diverse institutions' base, at which point the quality assurance systems will need to be flexible and embrace this diversity.

Sursock considers that innovation and developing creativity needs some 'constructive ambiguity' by preserving institutional autonomy and one needs 'to promote a higher education system that is characterised by three V's: vibrancy, vitality, variety':

> If we want vibrancy, vitality and variety in our institutions, should we not take steps to ensure that our quality evaluation procedures match these aims? …to allow for a certain degree of chaos and interdisciplinarity to promote creativity and innovation? … not consider their [the professors] role globally in terms of its teaching, research and service dimensions rather than evaluate separately each aspect? …to take account of their [the student population] global experience and evaluate institutions as a whole rather than their constituent parts? (Sursock 2002, p. 45).

One of the problems with accreditation systems (the US system is an exception) is that where accreditation goes hand-in-hand with quality improvement, the first component tends to overpower the second and predominate HEIs' priorities. This leads to compliance cultures, lower degrees of diversity and rigid bureaucracies. It is rather ironic that a CRE review team has recently recommended to a Eastern European

accreditation agency that improvement-oriented assessment should become the prime concern of quality assurance in that higher education system, while license-oriented, minimum-standard accreditation should play only a secondary role.

Keeping in mind the subsidiarity principle, the responsibility for creating the necessary quality mechanisms lies with each Member State while the responsibility for checking that proper mechanisms for quality assessment are developed by the Member States might remain at a supranational level (the 'European dimension'). Institutional audits along the lines established by the CRE/EUA should be encouraged in Europe (Amaral 1998), its main objective being changed to place more emphasis on verifying that institutions have effective and reliable systems for quality assurance of teaching and learning. This system should retain as one of its characteristics adopting a supportive view aimed at promoting the emergence of a culture of excellence.

Conclusions

Student mobility, graduate employability and study programme comparability appear as the cornerstones of the foundation of possible future policies aiming at the convergence of the national higher education systems, at least at the European level. The question that may arise centre on how this political agenda has come to be: did it result from national initiatives, taking into account national characteristics, national needs and the national degree of economic and social development, or did it result from the definition of development at transnational level? How did this movement towards European convergence gain impetus? Does this movement correspond to a democratic process or do other forces drive it? This is a crucial issue if one is trying to understand the Bologna process without falling into the traps of restrictive nationally driven policies and equally restrictive internationally driven policies.

Student mobility in Europe is limited to a small percentage of total enrolment. Despite all European funded mobility programmes the percentage of European-mobile students dragged ashamedly behind that same percentage in the early 17th century, and it is very unlikely that this percentage will increase in the future due to the costs of international mobility. Does this mean that all this trouble is for the sake of a small privileged minority? Or, in the words of Guy Neave:

> to the sociologically inclined, it also begs a rather different question. It is whether the architecture which the Sorbonne Declaration unveiled and which the Bologna meeting confirmed, is not designed to permit the emergence of a Euro elite and therefore subordinates the education and training of the mass to that single over-riding end. (Neave 2002, p. 11)

The process of economic globalisation is having a negative influence on employment stability and the bargaining power of workers and organisations. The right to employment, until recently a proud ornament of many constitutional laws and a major feature of the welfare state, is being insidiously but persistently replaced by the concept of employability. According to Neave:

> Employability is very far from being the same thing as Employment. Employment, one might argue, is no longer a responsibility of governments. That responsibility has been transferred to the individual. It is up to the individual and his – or her – primary groups to take responsibility to ensure his or her employability by studying programmes appropriate to his abilities, capacities, ambitions and, last but not least, the individual's view on where they may secure him advantage on the market. (Neave 2002, pp. 14)

So the Bologna process may also be interpreted as another move in the neo-liberal movement to decrease the state's social responsibility. A shorter and less expensive first-cycle of studies will give students a vocational training that will allow them to enter the labour market. At that point they will be responsible for the preservation or improvement of their own employability. The second cycle of studies (post-graduation) will thus become more of a private good, and as such duly paid by students without further demands on the public purse.

It can be argued that a discourse on the need to increase comparability between academic degrees apparently meets both the cultural and economic approaches to globalisation. On the one hand, 'comparability' is a path ultimately legitimated by the need to build a solid basis for European citizenship, and on the other hand it echoes the need for the individuals to be mobile within the European labour market. In fact, the Bologna approach also appears as a central device of a political strategy in the context of the changing nature of work and the labour market.

Work, as a set of technical gestures and individual and group attitudes with regard to the institution (business firm, corporation, etc.)

where labour activities take place, are a dissolving social category. The nature of work is changing and work, in the sense of profession:

(i) it is dissolving as a result of the increasing fragility of the wage relationship;
(ii) it is dissolving through the effects of the increasing 'lightness' of firms (i.e., the bigger they are the more they tend to subdivide until they melt into the air of 'off-shore paradises');
(iii) it is dissolving into competencies (Magalhães and Stoer 2002, p. 65).

Until recently people identified themselves with their work activities and with the institution where they worked. Today, it is becoming more and more difficult for someone to identify with 'work' as it assumes volatile forms of production, distribution and consumption. What remains appears to be definable as 'competencies' acquired directly through training, and which constitute specialisations that do not identify the individual.

As 'careers' are being replaced by 'jobs' (Sennet 2001), and the economy demands flexible forms of organisation and flexible/transferable human resources, the central issue becomes 'comparability'. If, in order to be 'employable', one needs to be flexible, in order to be flexible one needs to hold comparable competences.

In a curious way, the Bologna process can also be seen in the 'light of the so called democratic deficit in the present Institutions of Euroland' (Neave 2002). There has been urgency for presenting the developments of the Bologna saga under the seamless dress of generalised European consensus. Successive conferences and validation seminars were carefully organised to avoid or diminish the voices of dissent, to produce a 'cosy celebration amongst the faithful and the believing' (Neave 2002). However recent episodes of loud and clear disagreement as those witnessed in Lisbon (2001) and Salamanca (2001) cast serious doubts about 'the depth of the consensus so ardently hoped for and so regularly documented' (Neave 2002).

The Bologna process is now entering a new and very demanding phase. If some of the general principles (mobility, employability, comparability, transparency) can be generally accepted, another thing will be to operationalise those political principles. Neave considers that:

> The Bologna process has now reached the stage when principles begin to assume institutional form. And institutional form is not far

> removed from attributing mandates. Yet, he who speaks of mandates is but one step away from bringing up the fundamental question of control and co-ordination. (Neave 2002, p. 10)

and Sursock states:

> The quality assurance debate, as John Brennan noted, is really about power. It is a question of how quality is defined and by whom. The question of purposes beyond considerations of accountability and improvement is rarely taken into account. Because it is about power, quality assurance procedures can induce distortions that are not necessarily in the best interests of students, graduates, employers or society at large. (Sursock 2002, p. 44)

Therefore, it is not surprising that no consensus on accreditation within the Bologna process has emerged. What is perhaps more surprising is the recurrent nature of the accreditation disease. This might be explained by Levine's epidemiological metaphor: the presence of infectious agents of a very resistant variety. After each medical treatment, in the form of dissenting institutional voices, the disease apparently subsides only to manifest itself again some time later, in a recurrent form, the infectious agent being present either as the same species or as some form of genetic transformation. And Levin concludes:

> Could the idea of 'prevention' be applied to education as a way of preventing policy epidemics? Are there ways of strengthening the public mind on education to increase 'resistance' to 'infection'…? …some ideas about 'strong democracy' (Barber 1984) or civil society (Hall 1995) seem to have the potential to make the education body politic more robust. (Levin 1998, p. 139)

So far the case in favour of a European accreditation system has not been demonstrated. More research on this subject is necessary before a decision is made. However, if the final decision is taken in favour of accreditation, universities must play a fundamental role in the process. It is fundamental that the EUA will be able to make a decisive contribution by offering the most appropriate mechanisms to its member institutions. And an appropriate mechanism needs "to avoid a bureaucratic monopoly and decreasing chances of creating a narrow and rigid set of norms and values, leading to a lower degree of diversity of the higher education systems" (Van Vught 1991, pp. 80–81).

Notes

1. This designation is justified by Dale: "The work has been developed over twenty years through a wide range of publications put out by a group of scholars who may be referred to as world institutionalists" since their work develops on a world scale some tenets of what has become known as sociological institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio 1991, Finnemore 1996, Hall and Taylor 1996) (2000, p. 3).
2. Dill and Sporn "believe that the developments of the last decade have so transformed higher education that it is possible to conduct a genuinely cross-national and universal analysis of university reform. Similar to other policy areas where genuine international discussion is possible, such as governmental regulation, and industry behaviour, or environmental policy and natural resource management, the contexts and organizational challenges confronting major universities in different countries are beginning to converge" (Dill and Sporn 1995, p. 2).
3. "…in the short-term, and in any case within the first decade of the third millennium" (Bologna Declaration 1999).
4. In fact, IRDAC's (Industrial Research and Development Advisory Committee) 1994 report, for instance, had already made explicit recommendations to EU members on comparability and harmonisation: 'IRDAC recommends improving transparency and comparability of education and training across Member States and moving towards common terminology and language in education and training' (1994, p. 82). In the same sense, the report *Toward a European Model of Higher Education* (1998), written by a commission chaired by Jacques Attali, emphasised the need for European countries to harmonise curricula and diplomas.
5. IRDAC states that "by encouraging a move towards common terminology, through inter-institutional cooperation and by gradual acceptance of compatibility of national educational attainment, a gradual and demand-driven convergence of education outputs in Europe may become a reality – in the first instance based on a mutually agreed minimum standards and reciprocal recognition".
6. CRE – Association of European Universities was recently merged with the Confederation of the EU Rectors' Conferences into a new organisation, the European Universities Association, EUA.
7. CRE Project, co-funded by the Socrates Programme (Complementary Measures for Higher Education).
8. See for instance the note "Degree Unity Sparks Friction" by Rebecca Warden in the Times Higher Education Supplement of 6th April 2001.
9. See also Neave (2002).

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