

Sustainable Development as a new focus of the Bologna Process

Making the European Higher Education Area Sustainable

Seit der Ministerkonferenz in Bergen 2005 ist Nachhaltigkeit einer der Grundpfeiler der europäischen Bildungspolitik. Doch wie wird Nachhaltigkeit in den Bologna-Prozess integriert? Eine europäische Allianz von Universitäten zeigt erste Möglichkeiten auf.

Von Hans-Peter Winkelmann

Seeing the Bologna Process against the background of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UN DESD) in a global perspective, the Bologna Process is not just an education agenda about structures, such as the degree systems, recognition and quality assurance, but there is also a very strong social and cultural dimension as well as a wider political dimension to this process. The Bologna Process does not operate in a vacuum – it has a context and a set of broader European policy issues. The Bologna Declaration stated that a Europe of Knowledge is an important factor for social and human growth. Education and educational cooperation plays a role in the development of stable, peaceful and democratic societies.

European higher education needs reform in order to play its full role in the Europe of Knowledge. From the COPERNICUS-CAMPUS perspective the emphasis of the reform endeavours is mainly on the economic aspects, which is of course in line with the targets set out by the European Council in Lisbon: becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. However, sustainable growth and greater social cohesion can not be realized without paying attention to ecological, social and cultural aspects. In addition to the economic function of universities which is very important indeed, also the cultural function of universities remains important. From the economic perspective heterogeneity among European universities can be seen as problematic and from that perspective the Bologna process must be considered as a process of standardisation which deserves maximal support. Experiences in the private sector have shown how important the standardization of procedures in a globalizing economy are. On the other hand, social and cultural diversity could, just as biodiversity, also be seen as a potential resource. As technological innovation is a complex process that can not really be managed by only top-down policy, academic diver-

sity could also be seen as a potential feeding layer for creativity. By this it should not be suggested that universities must have 'old fashioned' academic freedom, but in addition to a European policy targeted at large scale standardization also bottom-up empowerment deserves a chance. For COPERNICUS-CAMPUS this is an important value in addition to sustainable development.

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When European Ministers responsible for Higher Education took in 2003 the conclusions of the European Council in Lisbon into due consideration and called for further action and closer co-operation in the context of the Bologna Process, they also reaffirmed the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level.

Sustainable Development: the link between the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process

At the same time, sustainable development is an overarching long term goal of the European Union. On the occasion of the relaunch of the Lisbon Strategy, the European Council reaffirmed that the Lisbon Strategy itself is to be seen in the wider context of the sustainable development requirement that present needs be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The European Council reiterated that under the Strategy, a stronger economy will drive job creation alongside social and environmental policies that ensure sustainable development and social inclusion. By revitalizing the Lisbon Process the European Union has put itself on the frontline of the implementation of sustainable development in the global context. The Bologna Process constitutes one of the most efficient means to realize this ambitious objective in the arena of Higher Education. Consequently, the European Ministers responsible for Higher Education decided at their last conference in Bergen in May 2005 that the Bologna Process should be based on the principle of sustainable development and be in accordance with the ongoing international work on developing guidelines for quality provision of cross-border higher education.

Pro-active universities are of vital importance in the Europe of knowledge, particularly to contribute to sustainable development. To meet the challenge of a sustainable society in a more and more global society, universities have to re-think their position. Which innovative approaches in teaching and learning are needed? The objective to achieve sustainable development and to bring Europe to the leading edge in the knowledge economy and society will present universities with a number of challenges and opportunities stemming from the Bologna Process:

- To prepare individuals for the labour market;
- To prepare for life as active citizens in democratic society;
- To contribute to personal growth;
- To maintain and develop an advanced knowledge base.

Sustainability as a strategy for universities will take up these challenges and will present a pro-active approach on what universities could do to realize the Bologna reforms in order to face globalization, to serve the learners of the future and contribute to the Europe of knowledge. If sustainable development is fully incorporated into the mission of universities, it offers the opportunity to overcome the great disadvantage of not looking at these issues in relation to their environment and provides a logic in keeping together the priority areas, attractiveness, governance, and funding of the modernization agenda in higher education that may appear not to be related.

Sustainable development addresses three areas, which are absolutely central to the future of most higher education institutions in Europe and to their role to contribute fully to the Bologna Process:

- Cost-effectiveness of higher education systems and management
- Improving the quality of higher education and making it more attractive and future-oriented
- Internationalization of higher education in a global civil society

It is commonly agreed that pro-active universities are critical for the complex processes of innovation, economic prosperity and social cohesion. Furthermore, sustainable development covering economic, societal-cultural and environmental aspects in a mutually reinforcing way provides an important link between the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process. Based on the principles of sustainable development, the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process share the same values. Both have endorsed sustainable development as a major priority and both have developed their own way to contribute to sustainability. They share the same regional context as well as a common responsibility towards present and future generations. Hence, sustainable development constitutes the intersection between the two Lisbon and Bologna processes.

Implementing the Bergen Communiqué

In the light of the Bergen Communiqué, COPERNICUS-CAMPUS as the European university alliance for sustainable

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development, is taking up leadership in the European Higher Education Area to mobilize universities and academia around the theme of sustainability and to support higher education institutions in the implementation in relation to the Bologna Process. For that reason, COPERNICUS-CAMPUS is developing strategic guidelines for the incorporation of sustainable development into the European Higher Education Area. These COPERNICUS Guidelines will be presented in due time for the next conference of the European Ministers responsible for Higher Education which is scheduled for May 2007 in London. The elaboration of the COPERNICUS Guidelines is being supported by the European Commission.

The COPERNICUS Guidelines should address the challenges higher education institutions face through striving for sustainability and should give them orientation help in implementation in connection with the Bologna Process. Further, they should ensure that the establishment of the Higher Education Area by 2010 will be based on the principles of sustainable development in the Europe of knowledge. Similarly to the COPERNICUS University Charter for Sustainable Development in 1993, the COPERNICUS Guidelines for the incorporation of the principle of sustainable development into the Bologna Process should become another milestone for European higher education.

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