

Student views on the Bologna Process

Introduction

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a voluntary membership organisation comprising a confederation of local student representative organisations in colleges and universities throughout the United Kingdom which have chosen to affiliate and which pay a membership fee. We have nearly 750 constituent members (CMs) - virtually every college and university in the country.

NUS is one of the largest student organisations in the world and represents the interests of around seven million students in further and higher education throughout the United Kingdom. NUS provides research, representation, training and expert advice for individual students and students' unions. We deal with over 15,000 welfare enquiries each year and train over 3,000 students' union officers.

Governments from 46 European countries, including the UK, have decided to create a European Higher Education Area. As a result there are major reforms taking place in many of these countries. These developments are known as the "Bologna Process" and affect all areas of higher education.

Student mobility

Academic mobility of students and staff is one of the core issues and key principles in building the European Higher Education Area. At the Ministerial Summit in Prague (2001) the mobility goal was reaffirmed by focusing on the removal of obstacles to the free movement of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff. The social dimension of mobility was also introduced, ensuring that all students and staff, no matter their socio-economic or cultural background, should be able to be mobile.

However there is still a long way to go to achieve these aims. The number of UK students going abroad as part of the Erasmus scheme was only 7,131 in 2005/6 compared to 16,321 European students coming to the UK. Statistical analysis also shows that UK mobile students are more likely to be white, from a high-income family with previous experience of travelling or living abroad, and generally more self-assured and academically capable than their peers.¹

Studying abroad can be an excellent experience and result in significant personal development as well as making the student more employable. There are many barriers to students studying abroad or that impact on the experience of those that do study abroad. The key question is whether the time spent studying abroad will be recognised as an integral part of their qualification and credits given on an equivalent basis to the institution that they study in the UK.

There are often concerns about the financial impact of studying abroad. Erasmus students receive an additional grant of, on average, 440 euros per month, however the average costs can be higher in countries where living costs are more expensive. UK students studying on Erasmus are able to apply for most of the same financial support than if they studied in the UK, and pay a portion of their UK tuition fees in their home institution as opposed to paying them in the host country. A common fear amongst students is that they may lose their part-time jobs that they have back in UK.

It is important that students are given the opportunity to study abroad and made aware of the opportunities available. We must also ensure that no student doesn't choose to study abroad simply for financial reasons.

¹ UK HE Europe Unit, "The Future of Student Mobility", Feb 2008

Recognition

The Bologna Process aims to ensure that periods of study abroad should also be recognised. Study abroad should be given equivalent credit to if the student had been studying in the UK and that this is incorporated into their final qualification. Study abroad should be seen as an integral part of study rather than as added bonus.

The aim of encouraging mobility is not just for students and lecturers but also for graduates. The recognition of UK qualifications within the European HE Area is still an area of concern for students.

There have also been questions surrounding the one-year Masters degree that is usually awarded in much of the UK. It is interesting to note that the majority of UK Masters students take taught qualifications rather than the two-year research Masters that is common in many other European countries. Whilst our one-year Masters meets the Bologna framework of 90-120 credits, they still come under a great deal of scrutiny. NUS would want to ensure that one-year Masters are supported as useful entry points to further study and future employment and would emphasise that diversity is one of the cornerstones of the European Higher Education Area and that there is still a place for the one-year Masters.

It is also worth noting from a student perspective that whilst in the UK a Bachelors or Honours degree is the usual qualification for graduates to enter employment in much of the rest of Europe the usual requirement is a Masters and if we are to ensure a truly mobile graduate workforce we will need to ensure that UK students with a Bachelors are given opportunity for employment overseas.

Learning Outcomes and Quality assurance

When assessing the quality of higher education, NUS believes that in a mature HE system the emphasis should be on improving quality rather than just approving it. NUS welcomes moves by the QAA to incorporate enhancement within its Institutional Audit process and recognise the developments in Scotland. It is also important that the quality of education should not simply be measured by the inputs, such as the number of contact hours that students receive, but rather we should be measuring the learning outcomes. This is already broadly the case in the UK and the Bologna Process aims to integrate learning outcomes in the European Credit Transfer System to translate the learner's experience more accurately.

We would also emphasise the importance of students being involved in shaping their learning experience at all levels and that students also have a valuable contribution to make to enhancing quality through both internal audit and external audit mechanisms. This is already the norm in many European countries and the European Standards and Guidelines within the Bologna Process are useful in supporting this development in the UK.

Diploma Supplement

Students value the Diploma Supplement, consisting of a transcript, programme/ course information, and the description of the national framework as a useful tool to enable recognition and believe that it should be used more and more broadly. There is still much evidence² that the Diploma Supplement is still not issued "automatically and free of charge to students graduating from 2005".

Conclusion

Whilst the Bologna Process has not required the dramatic reforms of many other European countries, it has still resulted in some improvements and even promotion of good practice for the UK higher education system, as well as the UK HE sector sharing best practice with other countries, and benefits for students. There is, however, still some way to go – especially to ensure the aim of genuine mobility of students and graduates.

² UK HE Europe Unit Survey of UK HEI engagement in European HE developments