

UK Position Statement on the Bologna Processⁱ: Berlin Ministerial Summit 18 – 19 September

UK support for the Bologna Process

1. The UK HE sector supports the Bologna Process which, leading to the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, will enable students to move freely across European higher education institutions (HEIs), resulting in a stronger civic society across Europe. We look forward to the next steps of the Process arising from the Berlin summit of European higher education Ministers in September.
2. The UK welcomes progress in the Bologna Process for three main reasons. First, the Process' push for greater student (and staff) mobility has produced students with transnational experience, cultural maturity, and not least, language ability; experience and skills which are increasingly required by employers in the European labour market. The UK is therefore pleased to engage in 'Bologna' to ensure that all our students have the opportunity to acquire these skills necessary in the labour market.
3. Second, we support the Process' goal to make European HE more attractive worldwide. Indeed as universities across Europe move from long courses to shorter bachelor degrees years, increasingly offered in English - with lower or no tuition fees - we recognise that they are becoming more attractive to the international student market. The UK is pleased therefore to participate in order to remain part of mainstream European HE, and to ensure our institutions continue to be well-placed to compete in the international student market at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.
4. The UK endorses the need for the Bologna Process to bring about an interface between the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA). We believe this is necessary for two reasons; first as a means of strengthening Europe's research capacity, and second because graduates at all levels need to have been exposed to a research environment and to research-based training in order to meet the needs of Europe as a knowledge society. This interface will also contribute to the fulfilment of the EU Lisbon strategyⁱⁱ of 2000. In particular we support EU efforts to recognise the key role European universities play in research across the continent. In the past the UK has been one of the main beneficiaries of the EU's Framework Programmes and we recognise the need to participate in the Bologna Process, which facilitates the forging of partnerships in the ERA, leading to the attainment of EU Research funding.

Management of the Process

5. The UK emphasises that the creation of the EHEA must continue to be through an 'intergovernmental' process based on respect for the diversity of higher education systems in Europeⁱⁱⁱ. It is important that all 37 participating countries reach consensus on the next steps of the Process and commit to implementing it. We also welcome the increased role played by HEIs in all areas of the Bologna Process, both as individual institutions and through the European University Association (EUA) and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

6. We welcome the interest and involvement in the Process by other key European organisations such as the Council of Europe, the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) and the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). We recognise the importance of the European Commission, for example in funding pilot projects. We emphasise that decision-making in the Process must remain the preserve of the HE ministers in consultation with HE sectors in the EHEA. Decision-making must not be subsumed into EU fora, because the latter would exclude some participants in the Process. It is also essential that decision-making occurs in an open and transparent manner.

Quality assurance

7. The UK supports co-operation in quality assurance (QA) in European HE, leading to the development of common high standards and arrangements for QA which place the maximum amount of responsibility on individual institutions.
8. The UK welcomes discussions in the Bologna Follow-Up Group regarding co-operation at European level between stakeholders to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance and to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for QA and accreditation agencies and bodies. While we acknowledge the contribution of the European Commission, we emphasise that future European developments in this area must be led by institutions and key stakeholders.
9. We emphasize that any future co-operation in European QA should not be overly bureaucratic or burdensome by adding further intrusive layers. In the UK, we have experience of the costs which such systems can so easily impose, directly or indirectly, on institutions. QA systems must be both useful and cost effective. The UK would resist attempts to introduce a European system of external course evaluation, a single pan-European quality system or form of course-based system. The UK's experience with course-based review is that it is unnecessarily bureaucratic and costly. Where institutions have strong internal quality procedures, as in the UK, institutional based review/audit has proved to be effective and cost-efficient.
10. The UK urges European HE practitioners to consider the adoption of a transparent outcomes-standards-based structure and a system of external points of reference of academic standards of HEIs' awards. These enable students and other stakeholders involved in HE to understand what students have achieved and what institutions are offering. Various European initiatives taking place under the Bologna Process are developing activities in these areas. For example, the Commission-funded, Tuning Educational Structures in Europe Project^{iv} has produced statements/characteristics of some broad subject disciplines; the Dutch Government-led Joint Quality Initiative^v has produced qualification descriptors (known as Dublin Descriptors); and the Bologna Copenhagen seminar^{vi} produced recommendations promoting a general qualifications structure/framework.

Degree structure: Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles

11. The UK supports moves in European HE sectors to adopt a system of two main cycles at undergraduate and postgraduate level (and if agreed at Berlin, three, with the inclusion of the doctoral level). This is a system which is well-entrenched across the UK. We also emphasise the

need for continued flexibility in programme design and structure, within the broad parameters identified in the Bologna Declaration. The articulation of a framework of qualifications in the EHEA into an undergraduate and a postgraduate phase must accommodate the great diversity of first degrees (reflecting their different purpose and orientation) and the variety of postgraduate degrees (reflecting their breadth and methods) that are needed across Europe today. We welcome therefore the conclusions of the Helsinki conference^{vii} on 'Masters level degrees' which noted that while masters degree programmes normally carry 90 - 120 ECTS credits, the minimum requirements should amount to 60 ECTS credits at masters level (one year.) Most taught masters degrees in the UK achieve between 75 and 90 credits and some research based masters, such as the MPhil, between 120 and 150. We were also pleased to note the seminar's agreement to the continued existence of 'integrated one-tier programmes leading to master degrees'^{viii}.

12. We also support the conclusions of the Copenhagen seminar^{ix} on 'Qualification structures in European HE'. Participants at this event agreed on an overarching qualifications framework for the EHEA, which would act as structural framework against which individual national frameworks could articulate with due regard to the institutional, historical and national context.

Promotion of mobility

13. The UK welcomes further moves to increase student and academic mobility given the proven career opportunities it produces. We support calls for more incentives to mobility by improving student support including: social support, housing and opportunities for part-time work; academic and professional counselling; and language learning and recognition of qualifications. We also emphasise the need to create opportunities for access to the benefits of mobility for part time and mature students and distance learners, for example by facilitating more short-term experiences abroad.

Establishment of a system of credits

14. The UK urges Ministers in Berlin to recognise established systems of credit transfer and accumulation and the need for institutions to be able to apply the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in a transparent but flexible way taking into account their own specific mission and priorities. Wales has operated a credit system for some years^x, and Scottish HEIs have operated a system of Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SCOTCAT) since 1990 which is broadly compatible with ECTS. SCOTCAT's development into the broader Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) was well received at the Prague seminar^{xi} on 'Recognition and credit systems in the context of lifelong learning'. It illustrates key developments which can be beneficial to lifelong learning and the ways in which links can helpfully be made with non-HE qualifications. With this in mind it is important that ECTS is defined (or applied) in a way which recognises the achievements of existing and well-established credit systems.
15. UK HEIs acknowledge that credit is a tool for expressing broad learning equivalence, measuring outcomes, currently usually alongside notional student workload. It is awarded to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of a designated learning outcome acquired at a specified level. It plays an important role in rewarding the incremental progress of learners, facilitating student transfer, recognising prior learning and contributing to the definition of academic standards. We are pleased that the conclusions of the Zurich conference^{xii} on 'Credit transfer and

accumulation', the Lisbon seminar^{xiii} on 'Recognition issues in the Bologna Process' and the Prague seminar on credit systems all reflect this view.

16. UK HEIs would be reluctant to see the extension of a credit transfer system into a credit accumulation system which focuses only on notional learning effort. This is because the basis of award, whether of credit or of a complete degree, should be the outcomes achieved. It is essential to use learning outcomes because they alone recognise different teaching efficiencies and extents of student preparedness for HE. As the Prague seminar showed this approach is particularly key when acknowledging credit for integrated lifelong learning; employers need to be informed about the capabilities and skills that students have acquired rather than a simple number count of hours spent studying. Furthermore any credit accumulation system must accord with the need for the structured intellectual development which is an essential part of obtaining qualifications. This might include professional, vocational and corporate qualifications. The basic element of *accumulation* should be that of volume of outcomes achieved, and that of *credit level* must still relate to the intellectual demand upon the learner in successfully completing such a qualification.

Recognition of degrees: Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees

17. The UK supports progress in this fundamental area of the Bologna Process, for example through greater use of the Diploma Supplement. We are pleased to draw attention to the fact that the UK has recently ratified the 'Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the Europe', which calls for greater use of the Supplement or any other comparable document.
18. We emphasise that the basic principle to be adhered to is that the institution which provides courses and programmes of study, should be free to respond to student needs, supported by a framework which underpins standards and quality and which shows clearly what individual students have studied and achieved.

Promotion of the European dimension in higher education

19. The UK believes that joint degrees are significant in improving graduates' capabilities in different Community languages and providing students with supervised experience of study in a variety of European university systems and cultures. We would resist attempts to produce a single blueprint for joint higher degrees. Thus, while the UK notes calls for joint degrees to have a "substantial and continuous period" of study abroad, as agreed in the Stockholm seminar^{xiv} on 'Joint degrees,' we could not support calls for this to be a minimum of 12 months at post-graduate level. This would be possible in the UK's two-year full-time programmes but not the one-year masters.

Promoting the attractiveness of the EHEA

20. The UK recognises that HEIs throughout Europe are involved in many collaborative programmes with other European institutions and institutions around the world^{xv}. We welcome initiatives such as the proposed Erasmus Mundus Programme which seeks to increase further the attractiveness of the EHEA, and we appreciate the significant benefits from greater pan-European HE sector co-operation. We also note that while this European dimension to HE activities is very important, it is one element within a wider range of international links between higher education institutions.

Given the UK's success at attracting international students^{xvi}, we believe that whatever 'European' promotion is developed, it must also allow scope for individual countries to continue to promote themselves as appropriate.

Lifelong learning

21. The UK welcomes moves to bring lifelong learning into the Bologna Process because of the need to introduce a European dimension to the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies as well as to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life. We also support the conclusions of the Prague seminar on lifelong learning issues, calling for development of national qualifications frameworks which can integrate forms of lifelong learning as possible paths leading to higher education qualifications, as well as access qualifications, within this qualifications framework.

EHEA and ERA: Two pillars of the knowledge based society (Additional actions)

22. The UK supports greater co-operation at doctoral level across Europe and we emphasise that this must not lead to over-rigid structuring of the third-cycle, for example in setting optimal lengths or making teacher-training obligatory. Similarly, we call for open access to the third cycle, subject to student performance, e.g. from both first and second cycles.

Work Programme 2003–2005

23. Because the UK supports the need for further work to be conducted in several areas under the Bologna Process, we would not support concentration of efforts in one or two areas, as proposed by the European Commission^{xvii}. We believe that priorities for the Bologna Process should include qualifications descriptors and frameworks linked to skills, competences and learning outcomes. Given the UK's experience of such systems we would be pleased to share good-practice and offer to host a Bologna seminar on this issue as part of the 2003 – 2005 work programme.

September 2003

End notes

This paper sets out the views of the UK HE sector (universities and colleges across the UK and stakeholders, such as the Funding Councils, the Quality Assurance Agency) towards developments in the Bologna Process and is addressed to UK and European decision-makers.

ⁱⁱ The European Council in Lisbon in March 2000, set the Community a new goal for the next decade: to become 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. For further information please see: <http://ue.eu.int/newsroom/newmain.asp?LANG=1>

ⁱⁱⁱ In the Bologna Declaration, Ministers call for the attainment of the objectives – “within the framework of our institutional competencies and taking full respect of the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and of University autonomy - to consolidate the European area of HE.”

^{iv} <http://odur.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/aims&objectives.asp>

^v <http://www.jointquality.org/>

^{vi} See footnote ix

^{vii} March 2003 <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Results.pdf>

^{viii} see footnote above

^{ix} March 2003 http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Results_copenhagen.pdf



^x The Welsh Assembly Government has recently called for the introduction of a Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales.

^{xi} Prague 2003 <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/recommendations.pdf>

^{xii} October 2002 <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Tagung%20Zuerich.pdf>

^{xiii} April 2002 http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/en/bologna_seminars/index.htm

^{xiv} Stockholm 2002 http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Stockholm_results.pdf

^{xv} The third 'Trends' report in 'Learning structures in European Higher Education: Bologna four years after'. http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/TrendsIII_sum.pdf

^{xvi} There are currently 141,000 international (non-EU) students studying in the UK and around 250,000 students following UK education and training programmes overseas.

^{xvii} As proposed by Education and Culture DG, European Commission, letter (13th February) to the Bologna Follow-Up Group