

Dietrich Lemke
**Mourning
Bologna**

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A Joyless Anniversary

The venerable old Italian university town of Bologna seems in danger of losing its long-established good name. The risk to the city's reputation, ironically enough, is due to developments in higher education, the very field in which its fame was established. In 1088, the first European university to be broadly independent of Church control was founded in Bologna, setting new standards in jurisprudential scholarship and, through its example, leading to the founding of other universities across the continent.

However, "Bologna" in contemporary European discussions of higher education now largely refers to what is known as the Bologna Process. The Process, begun just over a decade ago, is intended to reduce the traditional diversity of European universities, standardizing and unifying them along "American" lines.¹ This was to be done by unifying degrees, replacing them with the BA and the MA, and implementing the modularization of teaching, standardized testing, comparable outcomes, and other elements seemingly aimed at ensuring a unified field with greater mobility between countries and greater parity before funding agencies. The Process came to carry the name "Bologna" thanks to the city's hosting, in 1999, of a much-vaunted meeting of the education ministers of twenty-nine countries (not to mention their substantial retinues). The meeting launched a radical and still-ongoing process of transformation of Europe's universities and higher education institutions. The most extreme version of the Bologna Process is to be found in Germany – and thus for the countless critics of the process in Germany, the name "Bologna" has come to have highly negative connotations.

It all began quite simply: after a single-day session, the twenty-nine ministers published a declaration of intent – with sparse content and negligible legal effect – announcing that the creation of a common European educational area was vital to the promotion of geographical mobility, the common recognition of qualifications and, more generally, the economic development of the continent. Ten years and five biennial follow-up conferences later, the results of Germany's "Bologna" are announced on the Web site of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research:

The Bologna Process was launched in 1999. It has contributed to the successful modernization of the German institutions of higher education. Germany and its European neighbours have set themselves the task of creating a European Higher Education Area by 2010 in order to succeed

in the international competition for the best brains. In Germany, we have taken advantage of the biggest higher education reform for decades to improve the quality of study courses, to enhance employability and to reduce the length of studies.²

Underlining the ultimate justification for the process, the text's next paragraph affirms: "This means that we can make better use of the knowledge potential available."

While media rhetoric and government sources have trumpeted the supposed success of the process, more reflective souls may be struck by the very narrow definition of higher education as equipping citizens for the labor market. They may even ask who could or should profit from a more successful exploitation of this "knowledge potential."

These celebratory responses might have continued indefinitely, had it not been for events immediately following the June 2009 tenth anniversary of the Bologna meeting. The week after the anniversary saw a week-long student strike in sixty cities across Germany, with very large numbers of university and high-school students joining protests against conditions they felt to be completely unacceptable. Put under pressure by the sudden shift in the media climate, now more amenable to critics of Bologna, public figures like Education Minister Annette Schavan were forced to admit that the Process has been marked by serious shortcomings and mistakes. However, the subsequent waning of public interest in the Bologna Process allowed those in charge to push the problems back out of sight.

It took more student strikes during the following winter semester – this time employing building occupations and demonstrations to gain media and public attention – to reexamine the failed reform process. At this point even President Horst Köhler himself felt obliged to denounce the disgraceful failures and deficiencies in German higher education and to demand improvements and new ideas for the future, rather than a continued sweeping-under-the-carpet. At long last, the education ministers of the various federal states, along with other relevant authorities, were forced to address the problems.

In the meantime, many higher education institutions made attempts to simplify the newly introduced bachelors' and masters' degrees that had replaced the much longer magister programs, making them more comprehensible and lightening the massive burden of tests and exams borne by students. However, none of these corrective measures do more than treat the symptoms of the Bologna illness. They all fail

to address, and even fail to mention, the basic problem, namely Bologna's abandonment of what should be the central idea of higher education – the creation of graduates capable of critical thought and scholarly and scientific rigor.

The results of a much-heralded, politically high-powered "Education Summit" were just as bad. According to the politicians, the universities had simply failed in their implementation of Bologna, managing to make a stupid mess out of what they considered to have been a wonderful concept. Aside from this, the politicians' sole concern was to manipulate the figures to make it seem as if they had kept their past promises to increase funding.

Very simply, the politicians were just playing for time, clinging desperately to a visibly failed education reform package. This begs the obvious question: why do parties of all political colors stripes cling doggedly to Bologna? Ideology critique leads us to the obvious answer: the influence of interest groups that benefit, and want to continue to benefit, from the failed Bologna Process. The price for this is paid by the public; the burden is borne by those most directly affected by what is called the restructuring of higher education, but which may in truth be called its destruction.

The Implementation Process

If we look more closely at Bologna's implementation, a pattern becomes clear. The original approach was in fact quite open. However, in the course of successive conferences, the process was defined more and more narrowly, the bachelor/master model became mandatory for all, and any room for national and regional variation was progressively eliminated, flattening out the diversity that had been the strength of Europe's education system. Since the Bologna conference itself had no legal force, its decisions have to be effected through national legislation. Thus the German federal government passed a new Education Framework Law in 2002 that allowed for the establishment of BA and MA structures in German higher education, a law which, despite its imperative rhetoric, was only an enabling mechanism and not a mandate.³

This meant there was no discussion – neither in state parliaments nor within the individual universities – of whether these radical changes actually made any sense. In this way, the BA/MA model and the new credit-point system ECTS (also a product of Bologna) were introduced into German higher education by an edict from above, without the least consultation of those affected. There was of course some grumbling from university teachers, now de facto stripped of their autonomy, reduced to carrying

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out orders from on high. But in general, even substantial protest was simply ignored or fobbed off by those intent on pushing through the Bologna Process.

This was followed by a phase in which each faculty – under pressure from their administrations – was forced to radically restructure long- and carefully-established structures of study in their disciplines. In marathon meetings, these structures were hacked into new multifunctional (and polyvalent) modules. This concept of the “module” – originally derived from technology – refers to one element within a larger system, internally complex but capable of being replaced without requiring substantial change to the overall system. In the context of the reform of programs of study, the concept has a striking ambiguity: in “macro” terms it points to the dissolution of existing structures of meaning and coherence, and thus stands for contingency and arbitrariness; seen in terms of the internal “micro” structure of the module itself, the term stands rather for rigid and compulsory organization.

The supposed autonomy of modularized study units results in an exceptional increase in the number of courses offered, since any course

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designated as a “module” can now appear simultaneously in any number of programs, and thus can be statistically counted many times over. This is a highly desirable outcome for university administration, since it offers considerable savings, allowing them a cost-free way of improving their course-offering statistics. For those at the receiving end it means that courses are open to students from vastly differing programs, often from different branches of the university. The wildly diverse expectations and levels of previous exposure to the subject can present almost insoluble pedagogical problems for the teacher. This task is made no easier by the larger student numbers brought in by multiple listings in the course directory.

Increased attendance can be linked to another aspect of Bologna, namely the fundamentally control-oriented mentality that underlies it. This is exhibited in a basic distrust of students and an insistence on constant, and often unnecessary classroom attendance. The resulting overcrowding is intensified, finally, by the increase in actual course requirements for the new BA and MA courses. In this manner, overall standards in the universities are driven down in the direction of those prevailing in high



The 6th Bologna Ministerial Conference took place in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve from 28-29 April 2009.

schools. Autonomous study and independent thought are systemically hampered by the new modes of organization and the breadth of the prescribed curriculum renders impossible the kind of in-depth knowledge indispensable to scholarship.

Seen from the point of view of the internal structure of courses (or of other “study units”), modularization leads to standardization and to the breaking up of learning into bite-sized chunks, chunks then linked together in a system of incessant and immediate testing. Here, in the interest of a superficial and economic notion of pedagogical efficiency, there is a return to a primitive pedagogy of outcome-based learning, a fallacy I thought had been overcome thirty years ago.⁴ The prevailing desire to *control* educational outputs leads to the privileging of simplistic pedagogical aims. In principle, the application of learning-outcome theory could indeed have beneficial results, such as possible improvement in heuristic thought or the autonomous acquisition of important discipline-specific categories, instead of the endless production of ever more regulations.

This can be seen clearly in the implementation of the ECTS, the new Europe-wide credit-point system. Previously, the necessary scholarly achievements in any discipline were actually measured in graspable units, defined by classroom hours and requiring established proofs of achievement. Much has been made of the fact that the units of the new system would be calculated with a wider and more inclusive method, doing justice to the workload of students by taking into account preparation time, home reading, and so on. However, it can easily be shown that the figures on which the number of credit points per unit are based are simply plucked out of the air – I know of no colleagues who have ever undertaken a serious empirical calculation of student workload. Nonetheless these fictitious workload-point-system figures are the basis for very real disputes at the level of university planning committees.

Summary

It is now clear that Bologna’s large-scale restructuring of the German higher education system has failed to achieve a single one of the objectives it announced. The dropout rate has not fallen and student mobility has not increased; in fact, the opposite is the case. As a rule, German universities do not now automatically recognize credits from other universities, since the absence of federal guidelines has led to such inconsistencies and arbitrariness in the new course structures.⁵ Indeed, in many universities, students are

strongly warned against trying to transfer before completing their BA. Moreover, foreign universities often do not recognize the three-year German BA as an adequate basis for graduate-level study, putting a further block to mobility for German students.

In point of fact, the introduction of the three-year BA is a good indicator of the real reason behind the federal states’ energetic implementation of the Bologna reforms: Bologna allows for substantial reductions in state education costs. Statistics are improved, first, by simply declaring the three-year BA to be the standard university graduation diploma, and its holders thus to be “qualified” in some sense, and second by strictly controlling the number of students admitted to master’s-level study. In my view, completion of university studies with this version of a bachelor’s degree can only be seen as a kind of officially certified dropping out.

In line with the prevailing neoliberal zeitgeist, government is here ultimately aiming to shift the costs of higher education onto students and outside interest groups – above all, onto industry and finance – whatever the cost to academic freedom and the integrity of research. This trend is confirmed by new management structures now being introduced in many institutions, which come without any form of democratic accountability. Frequently, these structures give a role to the representatives of business, who, of course, have their own views on the purpose of higher education. All this points to a general withdrawal of the state from its constitutionally mandated role in higher education and heralds the opening of education to the influence of the real powers in the land.

Thus, it can be safely predicted that recently announced improvements to the Bologna system will not aim to foster critical consciousness and thought. For the purposes of business, it is best that the intelligence of university graduates is carefully steered into well-demarked areas of immediate market application. It is difficult to see business giving up its new leadership role in higher education without a fight.⁶ In which case it is up to critical academics, dissenting students, and the first signs of resistance within the trade union movement to expose the true meanings of Bologna.⁷

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Translated from the German

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This is paradoxical, since in fact the American system is anything *but* unitary. It is marked, above all, by vast differences in quality between different higher education institutions.

2

German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, "Bologna Process," <http://www.bmbf.de/en/3336.php>.

3

Since the federal education reforms of 2006, a legal framework at the federal level no longer exists, as all remaining responsibility for education has been transferred from the federal to the provincial level.

4

See my habilitation thesis: Dietrich Lemke, *Lernzielorientierter Unterricht – revidiert* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1981).

5

The reason for this absence is the federal reform mentioned in footnote 3.

6

The role of the Bertelsmann Foundation in achieving this new position of authority for business should not be underestimated. It can be shown that this foundation has had a substantial influence on the Bologna process in Germany, principally via the Centre for Higher Education Development, founded in 1994 by the University Rectors' Conference, which functioned as a "junior partner" of the Bertelsmann Foundation. On further aspects of the Bologna reforms, see my two other articles on the subject, both available online: "Lernen im Gleichschritt – die schöne neue Hochschulwelt," <http://www.nachdenkseiten.de/?p=2535>; and "Jubiläum ohne Jubel – 10 Jahre Bologna," <http://www.nachdenkseiten.de/?p=4429>.

7

Thus, for example, a working group from the Hans Böckler Foundation recently published new "Guidelines for a Democratic and Social Higher Education." See "Leitbild für eine demokratische und soziale Hochschule" (February 8, 2010), <http://www.nachdenkseiten.de/?p=4506#more-4506>.

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