

# The Bologna Declaration: an explanation

*The Bologna Declaration is a pledge by 29 countries to reform the structures of their higher education systems in a convergent way*

The Declaration is a **key document** which marks a **turning point** in the development of European higher education.

- It was **signed by 29 countries** which "undertake to attain the Declaration's objectives" and to that end "engage in coordinating [their] policies".
- It is a **commitment freely taken** by each signatory country to reform its own higher education system or systems in order to create overall convergence at European level. The Bologna Declaration is not a reform imposed upon national governments or higher education institutions. Any pressure individual countries and higher education institutions may feel from the Bologna process could only result from their ignoring increasingly common features or staying outside the mainstream of change.
- The Bologna process aims at creating convergence and, thus, is not a path towards the "standardisation" or "uniformisation" of European higher education. The fundamental principles of autonomy and diversity are respected.
- The Declaration reflects a **search for a common European answer to common European problems**. The process originates from the recognition that in spite of their valuable differences, European higher education systems are facing common internal and external challenges related to the growth and diversification of higher education, the employability of graduates, the shortage of skills in key areas, the expansion of private and transnational education, etc. The Declaration recognises the value of coordinated reforms, compatible systems and common action.

*The Bologna Declaration is not just a political statement, but a binding commitment to a n action programme*

The **action programme** set out in the Declaration is based on a clearly defined common goal, a deadline and a set of specified objectives:

- a clearly defined common goal: to create a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education;
- a deadline: the European space for higher education should be completed in 2010;
- a set of specified objectives:

- the adoption of a common framework of readable and comparable degrees, "also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement";

- the introduction of undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries, with first degrees no shorter than 3 years and relevant to the labour market;

- ECTS-compatible credit systems also covering lifelong learning activities;
- a European dimension in quality assurance, with comparable criteria and methods;
- the elimination of remaining obstacles to the free mobility of students (as well as trainees and graduates) and teachers (as well as researchers and higher education administrators).

### *The Bologna Declaration and global competitiveness of European higher education*

- Next to the need to "achieve greater compatibility and comparability in the systems of higher education" (mainly an intra-European issue), the Declaration wants "in particular" to increase "the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education". It says that the "vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal its culture has for other countries". The signatory countries explicitly express their goal to "**ensure that the European higher education system acquires a worldwide degree of attractiveness** equal to [Europe's] extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions".
- **On these "external" issues, the Bologna Declaration is genuinely opening up new avenues.** In stressing so explicitly the need for European higher education as a (cohesive) system to become more attractive to students from other world regions, it provides one more reason for moving in the direction of a coherent European system and implicitly invites European institutions to compete more resolutely than in the past for students, influence, prestige and money in the worldwide competition of universities.

### *From Declaration to implementation: an organised follow-up structure and process*

- The 29 signatory countries committed to attain the Declaration's objectives will "**pursue the ways of intergovernmental cooperation**", in collaboration with higher education institutions and associations.
- **Ministers have agreed to meet again in Prague in May 2001**, together with representatives from European higher education institutions and associations, in order to assess progress achieved and to agree on new steps to be taken.
- They have also established a specific **follow-up structure with a mandate** to prepare the Prague Conference and to facilitate and coordinate the action needed to advance the goals of the Bologna Declaration. The follow-up structure is based on:
  - a "consultative group" consisting of representatives of all signatory countries;
  - a smaller "follow-up group" comprising the countries successively holding the EU Presidency in the 2 years from Bologna to Prague (Finland, Portugal, France, Sweden), the Czech Republic, the European Commission, CRE and the Confederation;
  - in addition, since new political decisions may need to be taken in the process towards Prague, the follow-up to the Bologna Declaration will be on the agenda of meetings of EU education ministers.
- Follow-up work is in progress at the European, national and institutional level. The

Declaration states that the process of establishing a European space for higher education requires constant support, supervision and adaptation to continuously changing needs.

- A series of surveys and studies are in progress at the initiative of the group of national contact persons of the signatory countries, the EU Presidency, the European Commission and higher education associations and networks. They deal with transnational education, accreditation, credit systems, quality assurance, etc., and serve as preparatory steps for the next stages in the process.
- Signatory countries are considering or planning legislative reforms and/or governmental action in relevant areas of their higher education systems; **convergent reforms** have already been introduced or are in progress in several European countries. They signal a move towards shorter studies, 2-tier degree structures, credit systems, external evaluation, more autonomy coupled with more accountability. Another trend is towards the blurring of boundaries between the different constituent sub-sectors of higher education.
- Individual universities as well as higher education consortia, networks and associations are studying and discussing the implications of the Bologna process in their particular country, subject area, or type of institution.

***The Bologna Declaration invites the higher education community to contribute to the success of the process of reform and convergence***

- The Declaration acknowledges the crucial role of the higher education community for the success of the Bologna process. It says that inter-governmental cooperation should be "together with non-governmental European organisations with competencies in higher education". Governments also "expect universities to again respond positively and to contribute actively to the success of (their) endeavour". It is therefore clear that higher education institutions have a unique opportunity to shape their own European future and to play a crucial role in the development and implementation of the Bologna process.
- The Declaration specifically recognises the fundamental values and the diversity of European higher education:
  - it clearly acknowledges the necessary independence and autonomy of universities;
  - it explicitly refers to the fundamental principles laid down in the Magna Charta Universitatum signed (also in Bologna) in 1988;
  - it stresses the need to achieve a common space for higher education within the framework of the diversity of cultures, languages and educational systems.
- In order to respond to the invitation contained in the Bologna Declaration, the higher education community needs to be able to tell Ministers in a convincing way what kind of European space for higher education it wants and is willing to promote. **Universities and other institutions of higher education can choose to be actors, rather than objects, of this essential process of change.** They may in particular :
  - profile their own curricula, in accordance with the emerging post-Bologna environment, in particular through the introduction of bachelor courses in systems where they have not traditionally existed, and through the creation of master courses meeting the needs of mobile

postgraduate students from around the world;

- activate their networks in key areas such as joint curriculum development, joint ventures overseas or worldwide mobility schemes;

- contribute individually and collectively to the next steps in the process.

- The Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities (CRE) plan to organise a **convention of European universities and other institutions of higher education a few weeks before the Prague meeting**. This convention should provide an opportunity for the higher education community to discuss the main issues at stake and to produce a communication to Ministers on what higher education expects from the Prague meeting.

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