

EUA EVALUATION OF THE CRUS BOLOGNA UNIT

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and methodology

EUA was invited by the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities (CRUS) to undertake an external evaluation of the work of the CRUS Bologna/ECTS coordination unit. A methodology for this task was developed on the basis of the European University Association's (EUA) well-established experience in its institutional evaluation programme (IEP), as well as wide experience related to the Bologna process and institutional implementation, notably through the projects on Trends in Higher Education that have accompanied the Bologna process.

At the heart of the evaluation lay a detailed site visit centred at the CRUS offices in Bern from 10 - 12 October, and including a day spent at two universities - the University of Zurich and the University of Fribourg. EUA selected an expert team presided by Lars Ekholm, former Secretary General of the Swedish Conference of Rectors and also comprising Dionyssi Kladis, Dean of the Faculty of Social and Educational Policy at the University of the Peloponnese and former Director General of Higher Education at the Greek Ministry of Education, Cornelia Racke, currently working as representative for Luxembourg in the Secretariat of the Bologna process and David Crosier, Programme Director at EUA, who is responsible for the management of the EUA's Trends projects, and a co-author of the Trends V report. The EUA team was sent a wide range of background documentation in advance of the site visit, and also had access to the CRUS files, thus ensuring proper consultation of information not available in electronic format.

1.2 The Task

The EUA team immediately understood that its mission was complex, and required some unravelling. The terms of reference made clear that the aim was to assess the work of the Bologna unit with regard to the clarity of objectives, the efficiency of organisation, the effectiveness of activities, cooperation with the sector of the universities of applied sciences and of teacher education, and the quality of information provided on the Bologna reforms. The task was not, however, to evaluate the way in which implementation of the Bologna process has been undertaken in Switzerland.

This posed a number of challenges, as the work of a coordination unit can only really be appreciated if there is a clear understanding and analysis of the overall work which is being coordinated. So while this report does not have as its primary focus the way in which the Bologna reforms have been tackled and implemented in Switzerland, this topic has nevertheless been considered an important element for the team's consideration.

1.3 Swiss Higher Education Culture

The EUA team also recognised the need to understand and take account of the most important aspects of Swiss higher education culture. While it is clearly not possible

to have a fully rounded picture of such a complex issue as Swiss higher education culture from the short time spent in the country and the background information read as preparation for the audit, nevertheless certain features of Swiss higher education culture became very clear. The political, social, historical and cultural situation in the country is unique, and has a great impact in shaping the system and providing guiding contours for future development. The mixed federal and cantonal system of governance combined with a strong tradition of institutional autonomy and academic freedom mean that decision-making in higher education is a particularly intricate matter which takes place within a framework of complex structures and relationships designed to ensure balance of powers. Indeed pragmatic consensus-oriented decision-making is not just common practice, but a defining feature of the system.

The EUA team was also struck by the ubiquity of slight differences and grey areas from institutional context to another arising from the structural complexity of the regulatory system. The system certainly generates a considerable number of directives, regulations and explanatory documents, yet despite this, it is often difficult to pin down and provide a precise description of a state of affairs which would be applicable throughout the country. Whenever the team attempted to formulate such a statement with the hope of clarifying our understanding of the picture of national Bologna implementation, the response to our request to affirm or deny whether the statement accurately reflected the reality invariably began with the words, "*It depends...*"

1.4 The Role of the CRUS

The role of the CRUS has been evolving with the Bologna process. After the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, the CRUS accepted the challenge to take on the coordination of the implementation of the Bologna process, and from 2001 evolved as an association with new competences to assure the coordination of Bologna implementation in the Swiss universities. The EUA team would concur with the views of many of the colleagues whom we met during the visit that this decision was taken in the best interests not only of universities, but also of citizens and the country as a whole. Indeed some suggested that there was no other way in which the action lines of the Bologna process could have been implemented, and thus it was a bold and necessary development.

Yet it was also a decision which implied significant change for the CRUS, and threw up potential consequences that could be difficult to manage. While increasing its responsibility through accepting this coordination role, the CRUS also placed itself in a new, and perhaps more ambiguous relationship with its member universities: from this point it had not only to represent, defend and uphold their interests, but also to take responsibility for the implementation of political decisions that it could influence but not control.

If this situation were to have occurred in many other countries in Europe, there is no doubt in the minds of the EUA team that the relationship between Rectors Conference and universities would have proved untenable and led to crises for many organisations. There is equally no doubt in the minds of the EUA team members that the CRUS has so far managed this new role admirably, and has resisted being squeezed from any side. The significance of this achievement cannot be overstated.

The CRUS in general and the Bologna unit in particular has acted with scrupulous restraint in respecting universities' autonomy and thus not interfering in university affairs while coordinating Bologna implementation. At the same time, the CRUS has managed to maintain and strengthen confidence from all the political decision-making bodies, and especially the Swiss University Conference (SUK/CUS). This has been a wisely led and delicate operation. Yet the EUA team's perception from our discussion in two universities is that this path has been so successfully negotiated that many would now actually welcome more involvement from the CRUS. Thus the Bologna era has brought about an important evolution in the role of the CRUS: away from a "Rectors club", and towards an engaged representative university organisation.

1.5 Diversity of higher education institutions

A final introductory remark results particularly from the team's experience visiting two very different universities - the University of Zurich and the University of Fribourg. In all countries, universities have specific characteristics that define their mission and relationship in society. The EUA team is now particularly aware of the unique qualities of each university in Switzerland. Even factors which can normally be taken for granted in other countries - such as commonality of legal status - require specific understanding in Switzerland. Each institution is genuinely unique, and this provides the rich tapestry of the Swiss higher education system. Yet for the team it also adds to the difficulty of making clear comments. We are aware that many of the characterisations made of Swiss higher education can never be stated with total certainty, and that there will always be an institution that could point out, as they did on many occasions during our visits, that, "It is not *quite* like that here..."

2. THE WORK OF THE CRUS BOLOGNA UNIT

The first point that amazed the EUA team was how streamlined is the unit that is actually dealing with the task of coordinating the implementation of the Bologna process in Switzerland. Considering the range and complexity of issues being addressed, and the particular circumstances in Switzerland where so much has to be negotiated and explained, to discover that the unit shouldering this enormous responsibility has only four staff members comes as quite a shock.

The EUA team's first reaction was simply one of admiration that it has been possible to achieve so much and so efficiently with so few staff. The team also reflected on the fact that in all of the discussions and meetings that we held, no-one had made any negative criticism whatsoever regarding any individual in the unit. On the contrary, everyone who had direct contact with the staff was genuinely enthusiastic about the quality of their work. From EUA's experience in organising European-level Bologna implementation activities, (notably through projects coordinating ECTS counsellors and Bologna experts,) the EUA team is also aware that the CRUS Bologna unit enjoys a great reputation around Europe for its knowledge, experience and dedicated professionalism, and that materials produced by the unit have also been used successfully in other European countries. This testimony from all who work and interact with the staff is remarkable, and a great credit to all members of the unit. It speaks louder and is more significant than anything we could write in this report.

The EUA team was also impressed by how well known the staff of the Bologna unit are in the universities we visited. The structure of university staff contact with the CRUS Bologna unit was slightly different in the universities of Zurich and Fribourg, reflecting the ways in which these institutions organised their internal structures in relation to the implementation of Bologna issues. In Zurich, it was those in the coordination group who experienced the most contact with staff at the unit. In Fribourg, contact depended more on relationships established through particular activities and events, and this reflected the absence of Bologna coordination within the university. Bearing in mind that the CRUS Bologna unit has no mandate to “interfere” in Bologna implementation within the universities, and has respected scrupulously the limits of its mandate, the unit is clearly very well known and respected within the CRUS member universities. The work of the unit has clearly brought increased visibility and credibility to the CRUS, no doubt facilitating a number of other developments in the work of the organisation.

Along with praise and admiration should, however, be sounded a note of caution. It cannot be taken for granted that a unit that has worked so well with so few human resources will continue to do so indefinitely. The current approach is very much person-oriented and reliant on the knowledge and experience of the unit’s personnel. This can be perceived as a strength in the present climate, but also a potential future weakness. It is a real strength now because everyone in Swiss universities and partner organisations knows where to go for information, and the current staff undertake their work to an excellent standard. Yet it is a potential weakness that so much knowledge, expertise and responsibility rests with so few people.

Indeed, the current staff actually holds a wealth of knowledge and experience that would be very difficult to replace. When the future of Bologna implementation is considered, it can also be expected that the demands on the unit will grow rather than diminish. This needs to be given some consideration in future organisational planning. Even taking into account the culture of very streamlined and efficient work within the CRUS as a whole, it seems to the EUA team that additional human resources should be considered for the unit, and one of our recommendations therefore concerns the strengthening of the team, possibly by the addition of a deputy head of unit.

3 BOLOGNA IMPLEMENTATION IN SWITZERLAND

3.1 European commitment

Unlike most countries in Europe, Switzerland was very quick to follow up the signing of the Bologna Declaration with action to take forward implementation. Indeed the early years of the Bologna process seem to have been characterised by an enthusiastic drive to make the most of the potential benefits of enhanced European cooperation for the development of the national higher education system. There is no doubt in the minds of the EUA team that this engaged attitude from the early stages has given Switzerland a number of advantages.

Particularly when change is inevitable – which is the case for the main aspects of the Bologna process - there can be little doubt that it is better to engage with it rather than to procrastinate. And when undertaking a step by step process, the first step is always among the most important. Thus, the decision in Switzerland to take this first

step early in the process can be seen to have given the country a competitive advantage in Bologna implementation.

The issues thrown up by implementation of the Bologna process, however, have been underestimated in many parts of Europe, and significant reform inevitably raises major challenges. There is no country in Europe where all aspects of the process have been smooth. If the Bologna process is implemented seriously, it implies a profound and radical re-thinking of long-accepted paradigms of higher education systems, and thus will never be perceived as an overnight success. In a country such as Switzerland, with so many layers of decision-making, a culture of negotiation and pragmatism, and respect for institutional autonomy, it was inevitable that certain aspects of implementation would prove to require a great deal of work, and would be time-consuming and highly complex. This has proved to be the case.

3.2 Consolidating Reforms

From the discussions that the EUA team had at the two Swiss universities visited, it became clear that, after a first wave of action, it is now a good time to reflect on some of the difficulties experienced in implementation, and to consider how the future challenges should be tackled.

In some ways it could be considered that the “first wave” of implementation was somewhat rushed in the desire to make progress quickly. The question of “how” to implement seems to have taken precedence over ensuring the existence of a broad consensus to answer the question of “why” the Bologna process concepts were required. This is by no means a unique Swiss phenomenon, and indeed much time and effort is now being devoted across Europe (some would argue rather late in the day) to a consideration of the nature of the European Higher Education Area post 2010. Nevertheless without a shared conception of the outcomes that are being strived for, it is difficult to establish a coherent strategy for the implementation of the various particular action lines.

Through meeting many people in a short time in Switzerland, the EUA team also heard a number of slightly different visions of the envisaged goals of reform, and these slight differences have clearly had consequences to the way in which the implementation of Bologna action lines has been addressed. Again, this is a common phenomenon in Europe, but it is a reality that should not be neglected when considering the work of the CRUS Bologna unit. In the absence of a clearly articulated and shared vision – and with the main academic responsibility for defining this vision resting within the higher education institutions themselves – some aspects of the work of the unit will inevitably be perceived as technical assistance, concentrating on how to understand and use different tools rather than addressing in detail the more fundamental questions of why these tools are needed.

At the universities visited, there seems to have been particular concentration on parts of the Bologna picture, while other aspects, including questions of employability and lifelong learning, have so far been neglected. Statistics provided to the team as well as the interviews undertaken in the two universities all indicate that the first bachelor graduates from Swiss universities are invariably continuing to master programmes. This is one indication that the debate on the relevance of the bachelor qualification

for the labour market has so far not been taken up seriously within the universities, and there were few signs given to the EUA team that there has been much discussion with employers on their expectations for university bachelor graduates. While some academics have strived to define an educational vision to be achieved through implementation of the Bologna action lines, discussion has also not often extended between faculties within universities, nor between faculties across universities. Thus the “Bologna vision” appears rather like a fragmented crystal with different images to be seen from different perspectives, and there now seems to be a strong need to establish greater overall coherence.

Swiss higher education has also faced some disadvantages as a result of coming fast out of the starting blocks to tackle Bologna implementation. In particular, not all of the Bologna tools were fully developed to assist in the process of curriculum reform and development. For example, many around Europe have been grappling with the implementation of ECTS as a support to curriculum reform, but without a fully developed understanding of learning outcomes. This is also the case for Swiss universities. It is clear that there is now a need to educate staff and students in the framework of an approach based on learning outcomes, and this step, anticipated already by the Bologna unit, has to be a high priority for the future.

3.3 Faculty responsibility for implementation

Relationships and division of responsibilities within universities play a vital role in successful implementation of reforms. In both universities visited the EUA Team found a strong tendency for faculties to decide for themselves the best way to do things. In some ways, this approach is to be applauded. One of the most notable features of our visits to the universities was that the staff we met generally had a high awareness of the Bologna process, and indeed a strong sense of European goals and values. This was indeed notably more evident than in institutions visited during Trends site visits in most other countries in Europe. The EUA team was also struck by the great importance of contributions made by unassuming, committed and loyal academic and administrative staff. Without the tremendous endeavour and graft of these staff – who too often are taken for granted – the transformation that is taking place in Swiss higher education would simply not have occurred.

It was also clear that the process of engaging with the Bologna reforms had also brought many universities closer together. Through the Bologna process, questions have been raised that give more sense to the notion of a Swiss higher education system. Some of the academics that we met emphasised that they were cooperating more between universities in the country now than before the Bologna reforms, while a considerable number of students we talked to were considering studying in another Swiss university for a part of their studies. While the EUA team did not seek statistical evidence of trends in student mobility within the country, it would not surprise us to learn that it is increasing. The current developments to facilitate recognition of qualifications between universities of applied sciences, universities of teacher education and universities will also give further momentum to this process.

While it is important for all faculties to embrace, participate in and take ownership for reforms, a balance also has to be struck with overall system and institutional coherence. In some cases it appeared that faculties that had been the most insistent on autonomous implementation of Bologna reforms had acted with the least

awareness of European developments and rather myopic vision – and ironically it was voices from these faculties that are complaining now that Bologna has failed to deliver the benefits of flexibility and mobility promised to students. The EUA team was surprised to learn, for example, that some faculties, although aware of discussions and decisions on the structure and content of new bachelor and master programmes being made in other faculties in Swiss universities, had chosen structures and contents that would inevitably make their programmes incompatible, and thus would reduce possibilities for student mobility and the development of flexible learning paths. Such decisions were vigorously criticised by the students that the EUA team encountered, and it does seem likely that in cases like these a wider institutional discussion of the objectives of Bologna reform would perhaps have led to some different decisions being made.

It is not only academic staff that have an opportunity to network with other colleagues in order to ensure coherent development. This applies equally to the construction of administrative systems. Again, the EUA team noted that some tasks that have come about as a result of the Bologna process have been pursued separately in universities rather than in a consolidated manner. For example, more sophisticated systems for tracking student admission and progression are increasingly a necessity when students have more choices following their first cycle (bachelor) programmes. Efficiency gains could be made if such tracking were planned and developed in the same way across all higher education institutions. Our impression, however, was that the universities (and indeed some faculties within universities) had designed their own specific systems and the opportunity of ensuring a compatible, interlinked system across the sector has been missed, or at least set back.

3.4 Student Participation

Not only have choices sometimes been made that have created new obstacles and problems for students, but there also has been a general lack of partnership with students. The sample of students that the EUA team met during this visit, whether representatives of student associations or so-called “ordinary” students, were all extremely articulate with well-considered views of how things had been done, and what might have been done differently or better. Indeed, with such a display of intelligence, critical thinking, rational analysis and pragmatic problem-solving, they were a fine example of the high quality of education clearly being delivered through the system.

Assuming this sample of students to be representative of the high general quality of the student body, it is even more difficult from an external point of view to understand why more has not been done to include students systematically in discussion and implementation of reform. Again the EUA team is fully aware that the picture is not black and white and that some universities have more systematic student involvement in faculty councils and other decision-making structures than others. Yet overall, the picture that emerges of Swiss higher education is not one of equal partnership, and indeed in some instances there seems to be a scepticism and mistrust of including students as partners in policy debate and decision-making. The student complaint that resonated very strongly was that they had to make an effort continuously to participate in discussions where they feel their place at the table should be assured. These arguments were extremely convincing to the team, and

attention to systematic student participation is therefore one of the recommendations that we consider particularly important for the future.

The relative absence of students as partners is a major weakness of implementation so far, and is holding back more successful initiative. Reforms should be designed to benefit students, and it is therefore logical that students should be encouraged to play a role as partners.

3.5 National Implementation

A final observation is that Switzerland, like many countries, seems to have had a tendency to consider many aspects of Bologna implementation as very much a Swiss affair. The CRUS Bologna unit is specifically exempted from this comment as they clearly participate in as much European activity as possible, and make systematic efforts to seek advice and support from other European countries. However, university faculties do not often seem to follow this example. The EUA team certainly did not have the impression that many were looking very far to learn from wider European experience.

It would therefore perhaps help to consider ways of spreading information about European events more widely as part of the future work of the Bologna unit. It would be of great benefit to extend the range of "Swiss representatives" in European higher education meetings, and particularly to give more opportunities to Swiss academic staff to exchange experience with their European counterparts. In this context, the EUA team also support the views of the CRUS Bologna unit that it would be helpful for some official Bologna experts in Switzerland to be selected from among the members of the academic community.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

1) The work of the unit is likely to increase rather than diminish: indeed it is likely that the foundations of the work achieved will branch in new directions, posing challenges that require creative solutions. There is therefore a need to support the staff in the Bologna Unit as much as possible. While nearly everyone that we spoke to seemed comfortable with the streamlined nature of the Unit, the EUA team feels that there is a risk that too much is concentrated on the shoulders of too few. **It may be worth considering the possibility of creating a further position in the Unit, possibly by creating a new post of Deputy Head of Unit.**

2) A flexible approach to the future challenges for Swiss higher education is certainly to be favoured, but there is also a need to **identify the key issues for the forthcoming period**. The EUA team supports the decisions already taken in this respect. It is clear that there is a need to **educate staff and students more in the framework of an approach based on learning outcomes**, and this needs to be a high priority. At the same time, the approach to **curriculum reform should link learning outcomes to employability issues** - which have been rather neglected by many universities and faculties until now. This discussion should also take place within a perspective of **lifelong learning challenges** that so far have made only a marginal impact on higher education thinking in the country. A final challenge, which is already being taken forward, is to **re-think the third cycle, also in light of the**

changing society and labour market. Swiss higher education is highly attractive in the international arena, and innovation in the structures and contents of the third cycle could play a significant role in ensuring a leading role for the country at the heart of Europe (if not at the heart of the European Union).

3) In a system largely based on faculty responsibility one of the key issues is to **ensure that Deans are fully informed of Bologna issues and aware of the implications of different choices** they may make. Greater priority could be given to the Deans in future activities of the Bologna Unit. While there are a range of existing networks that play a key role in disseminating information and education institutions, the Deans are perhaps under-used at this stage. Specific events for Deans should be considered, and these should begin at an early stage of policy discussion and development. **The Bologna Unit could consider organising a programme of national workshops specifically for Deans.**

4) While aware of the sensitivities in all governance and decision-making, the EUA team would advise a discussion to make progress in four areas:

i) **The relationship between the Rectors (in the CRUS) and Deans:** specifically, if decisions are taken by Rectors collectively, what does this imply for the universities? How far should the Rectors be able to take decisions on behalf of the university, and how far should Deans be able to refute decisions?

ii) **Student participation in decision-making:** how can students be integrated as partners in all policy discussions and decision-making processes? Is there any reason for this not to happen?

iii) **Input to strategic development from outside Switzerland:** how can universities gather relevant information from other European countries to assist in their reform and implementation activities?

iv) **The relationship between universities and other higher education institutions:** what should the relationship be between different types of institution in the Swiss system in taking forward different aspects of the overall higher education mission? How far should boundaries be set for which institutions do what, and how far should this be left for the institutions to decide for themselves?

5) **The relationship between the Bologna unit and the universities/faculties could also be strengthened.** While respecting formal regulations and frameworks, it would be an interesting time to extend work with universities – including collecting and analysing information related to Bologna implementation. **More systematic feedback from universities would facilitate planning of CRUS activities,** and help to develop the dynamic relationship between the CRUS and Swiss universities. The CRUS could also examine possibilities to support more networking across the Swiss universities, again particularly in relation to Bologna priorities.

6) **The Final recommendation from the EUA team is that the extraordinary work that has been undertaken by the Bologna Unit should simply continue.** We are very happy to report that, in our view, there is no need for any radical change or re-think of the fundamental structure and orientations of the Unit. We are in

absolutely no doubt that the team is doing excellent and important work, and long may it continue to do so.

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