

# Britain's Relationship to the Bologna Declaration

*Lewis Elton*

The paper argues that there are very large qualitative differences between the higher education systems and practices in different European countries, which will not be apparent in the essentially quantitative approach to harmonisation basic to the Bologna process. As far as Germany is concerned, it is likely that the recent changes in its higher education system, which will bring it closer to the British system, will have unfavourable unintended consequences that at least in part are wholly predictable on the basis of the very different historical developments in the two countries. Furthermore, there is indeed no single 'British system' and the very significant differences between higher education in England and in Scotland are explained.

## 1 Introduction

Support in Britain for the Bologna Agreement appears less clear than in Germany. Officially, i.e. at the level of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors (Universities UK 2003), there would appear to be full support. However, the majority of academics and their students seem hardly to have heard of it, let alone made any relevant preparations. As the rest of Europe seems to have used the Agreement, so as to base the future of their higher education systems close to the current British one, it may be thought that there is no need for great changes in Britain, and British indifference is therefore not harmful. One purpose of this article is to argue that this is not so and to explain this puzzle.

## 2 Britain – one country with two (and possibly now three or four) systems

There have been two very different educational systems in Britain for at least 300 years, those of England and Scotland, with the Bologna process essentially modelled on the English system. Although there is of course much collaboration at the level of individual academics, as systems they always have been and are likely to continue to be completely separate and independent of each other, especially as education in Scotland is

now the responsibility of the Scottish parliament. (Recent devolution is allowing Wales increased independence from England, but that will not be discussed here, as it has so far not significantly affected its higher education. Similar developments in Northern Ireland are held up by the present political situation there. However, here too the stress will be almost certainly on independence and not on collaboration in a federal system.) The brevity of the English three years first degree has always been justified on the basis of the high specialisation in the last years of secondary education, which – at the expense of a more general education – has enabled schools to teach much that is first year university work elsewhere. The same has never been the case in Scotland, where secondary education is much less specialised and the first degree lasts four years.

Paradoxically, there was until recently a strong move in England to make the final school years less specialised – perhaps through the adoption of a final examination close to the International Baccalaureate – but this proposed change has just been killed by the Government which has reaffirmed its belief in the 'A level gold standard' in courses that are more specialised than corresponding courses in any other country (including Scotland!). Indeed, part of the change proposed now is to put more university work into the final school year, at least for the most able students. At the same time, universities have extended many of their courses, particularly in the sciences and engineering, to four years simply on the basis of content pressure. While the Bologna agreement allows three or four years for the first cycle, the current and likely future situation in England casts serious doubt on whether there should be any first cycle curricula of less than four years. Hence the recently expressed concerns in the Czech Republic (*Holdsworth 2004, Elton 2004*) regarding in particular the medical curriculum where "you cannot have a conceptually complete three-year bachelor degree in medicine because the first three years are just a foundation" may well indicate more fundamental concerns.

### **3 Recent Developments in Teaching and Learning in British Universities – have the British discovered Humboldt?**

Until recently, university teaching in Britain, has not been thought of as a field for research and development – one taught largely as one had been taught. Thus, Ashby (1985), one of the most experienced British academics of the past fifty years, wrote at the age of 80:

"For many years I taught in universities. Like most academics I assumed that the only qualification I needed was expertise in the discipline I taught (which was biology). It did cross my mind that *how to teach* might be a discipline in its own right, but I never gave

it much thought. I marked thousands of examination scripts without examining what the scripts could teach me about my capacity as a teacher and examiner."

This probably still represents the view of the majority of academics in all European countries, but there is now a minority in Britain who think differently; a growing minority, strengthened by the recent establishment of the Higher Education Academy. There are now professors, journals, books, conferences and societies that testify to the richness of the field of higher education pedagogy, in a way that exists in few if any other countries in Europe. In principle, this should not affect the Bologna agreement, which allows each country to specify its own contents and methods in terms of transferable credits, a matter to be discussed in the next section.

However, the fact that within Britain – and this transcends the differences between England and Scotland – students now may well have very different learning experiences in student centred as opposed to teacher centred learning may become relevant to the relevance of the Bologna agreement. This development has one of its roots in Humboldt's demand for research-like learning (*forschendes Lernen*) in universities, as opposed to school-like learning (*verschultes Lernen*) – although few in British higher education have ever heard Humboldt's name and if they have are liable to confuse it with that of his brother. The resulting curricula, such as enquiry based learning and problem based learning, which concentrate on the student rather than the teacher (see e.g. *Savin-Baden 2000*), are opening a gulf that creates real differences between curricula in the same discipline, even within the British systems. At the same time, they are still very British, in that they maintain the Newman concept of students *in statu pupillari*, in contrast to the Humboldtian concept of *Lernfreiheit*. Also, they are wholly uninfluenced by foreign concepts like *Bildung*<sup>1</sup>.

The relevance of Humboldt may escape a German audience which is preoccupied with the apparent total rejection of the Humboldt concept in German universities, in favour of one much closer to the UK/US model of directed study. Whether this is inevitable in a mass higher education system is debatable; the recent developments in Britain may indicate the opposite. Furthermore, there is a serious danger that in such borrowing from other systems, the borrowing is confined to the cruder aspects, while subtle differences – such

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<sup>1</sup> The difficulty of this concept for a British audience may be indicated by the fact that a recent issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, 36 (3), 2002 is wholly devoted to an understanding of it.

as the final year project work in Britain – are ignored. No new system is ever wholly divorced from what preceded it and I am certain that a German version of the UK/US model will be very different from that model. This can be readily verified from e.g. the recent experience of a British exchange student in Germany (*Pidd 2003*) which should be compulsory reading for any student of comparative education. At worst, the new German model may well fail to incorporate good aspects of earlier German models, just because they did not exist in the UK/US model.

Another important point is that the UK/US model referred to is valid in Britain largely also at the postgraduate Masters' level, while in the United States postgraduate education has always been sharply different from undergraduate education.

#### 4 The Bologna Declaration

The Bologna Declaration is now about six years old, but there has been remarkably little reaction to its proposals in Britain – by the time that they are put into operation, it will be very difficult to change them in the light of experience. This situation is particularly common in education, where effects are often long delayed. It is then desirable to predict undesirable consequences before they happen and so avoid them; on the basis of some direct evidence, some indirect evidence and some hypothesising (*Elton 1988*).

Within the overall aim of 'creating a coherent European higher education space to foster employability and mobility in Europe', the objectives of the Bologna declaration (*Haug 2000*), as confirmed in the subsequent Berlin (2003) and Graz (2003) declarations by Ministers, are:

- a) The design of a common framework of reference of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- b) The articulation of studies into undergraduate and postgraduate levels;
- c) The generalisation of credit systems compatible with the European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS);
- d) A European dimension in quality assurance and the elimination of obstacles to the mobility of students, teachers and graduates.

While declarations seem to get more and more wordy, it is worthwhile quoting passages from the Berlin declaration which are particularly relevant:

"As the Bologna Declaration sets out, Ministers asserted that building the European Higher Education Area is a condition for enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of higher education institutions in Europe. They supported the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility (regulations etc.), and that students are full members of the higher education community."

"Ministers strongly encouraged universities and other higher education institutions to take full advantage of existing national legislation and European tools aimed at facilitating academic and professional recognition of course units, degrees and other awards, so that citizens can effectively use their qualifications, competencies and skills throughout the European Higher Education Area."

## **5 Design of a common reference framework of easily readable and comparable degrees**

Universities are independent institutions and they have developed over up to 800 years. Thus it is to be expected that they will differ not only between countries, but within each country. At the same time, much of this development has been haphazard and uncoordinated. Their extraordinary survival under hugely changing conditions is almost Darwinian and, just as the plant and animal kingdoms, so universities exhibit a variety that appears to defy reason. Wisely, the creators of the Bologna Declaration knew this and did not try to design a common framework for universities – but merely a common framework of reference aimed at harmonising university courses and qualifications. They might not have attempted even this more limited objective, had it not been for the pressing need in most of Europe to reduce the length of courses in the interest of the economy. Here is Berlin (2003):

"Ministers noted with satisfaction that the objective of a degree structure based on two main cycles, articulating higher education in undergraduate and graduate studies, has been tackled and discussed. Some countries have already adopted this structure and several others are considering it with great interest."

However, as was pointed out earlier, the brevity of the first degree in England depended on the excessive specialisation in English schools, something that no other country was likely to adopt. Another absolutely fundamental way in which British universities differ from continental ones is that they are unprotected in law against Government financial

pressures (*Elton and Lucas 2004*). As far as students are concerned, a huge opportunity to adapt British degrees to modern times has so far been missed, for students might well have put the highest priority to the relaxation of two current constraints, the rigid enforcement of the length of the first degree and the distinction between full-time and part-time students. That the German attitude to these issues is effectively the opposite of the British is not surprising – past practices have been radically different and an attempt to converge towards the middle would be entirely legitimate.

## 6 Equivalences through a credit system

The Bologna agreement proposes that the comparability of different systems in different countries is to be established through a common credit system, compatible with the European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS). Indeed, the proposed structured scheme would be meaningless, if there was not something beyond a title that was to be common, and an obvious solution was to make the standards of each of the stages comparable for the whole of Europe and across disciplines. Thus Berlin (2003):

“Ministers emphasized that for greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes the adoption of common cornerstones of qualifications, supported by a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation functions, is necessary.”

The ECTS scheme attempts to do that, but the meaning of such an essentially content and process free harmonisation remains in doubt. Is it really possible for degrees of, say, in history to be of the same standard everywhere; or – even more difficult – can the standard of a history degree be demonstrated as equal to that of, say, a physics degree; or – possibly most difficult – can traditional courses, taught largely through lectures and assessed through formal examinations, be meaningfully compared with modern courses, which may comprise student centred learning, group work, negotiated learning objectives and self-assessment?

There are two precedents, and much can be learned from them. The first is the American credit scheme, where broadly speaking within each university a first degree course is made up of parts, each of which has a credit rating, based on its length, usually measured on the basis of the number of lectures and classes, and – sometimes but not always – on the year in which it is taken. The main purpose of this scheme has always been the desire to allow students in each university to organise their courses flexibly within the

totality of credits for a degree. The purpose has never been either to make courses in one discipline equivalent in difficulty to those in other disciplines in the same university or to make courses in one discipline equivalent to courses in the same discipline in other universities.

The second precedent is the British credit system – more relevant now because it is this system which is to be adapted for Europe through the ECTS system. It determines the credit rating of a course in terms of the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a programme, objectives preferably specified in terms of learning outcomes and required competences at specified levels. The difference – and it is huge – between the American and British credit systems is that credit ratings in the former can be numerically calculated and are not automatically transferable, while in the latter they require judgement, even if in the end the judgement is turned into numbers, but in theory can then be automatically transferable between institutions. The advantages and disadvantages inherent in such a system were discussed in a special issue of the *Higher Education Quarterly* 55 (3), 2001, particularly in the articles by Gosling (2001) and Adam (2001). So far, there are no British universities which have adopted a credit transfer system completely.

Another, and perhaps even more serious problem arises from the fact that credits are based on workload and levels, both of which are quantifiable, while the real differences may arise more from qualitative differences. I will illustrate this issue in terms of differences between British and German university education which respectively derive from the very different philosophies of Newman, who was primarily concerned with the development of the student, and Humboldt, whose prime concern was the furthering of *Wissenschaft*.<sup>2</sup> Now a particular tenet of the Humboldtian university was the concept of *Lernfreiheit* of students, which has survived in the way that German students are primarily responsible for their learning and their acquisition of knowledge, to the extent at times of independence shading into institutional neglect. Such freedom is totally unknown in Britain. There students are much more cared for (*betreut*) and their lives and work are much more closely circumscribed. In consequence their learning can be much more

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<sup>2</sup> I apologise to both for this perversion of their respective philosophies, but the consequent differences in the development of higher education have been so huge that it is permissible. Thus, viewed from a distance, the German university continues to be Humboldtian, even if in Germany there is a greater stress on the departure from it, and the same is true of the British university where you may have to look at e.g. the University of Luton from a long distance to preserve its Newmanian nature, but it is there.

efficient, although not necessarily more effective – but efficiency matters in a climate where the quantity of years studied matters more than their quality. So the question has to be asked how far it is possible to compare the nature and quality of the student experience – and that is after all what is really important – between different systems. While it is certainly the case that students from one country can greatly benefit by having higher education experiences in another, this is a far cry from establishing equivalences between them. To make matters even more complicated, there is the recent move in Britain to student centred learning, referred to earlier.

## 7 The Management of Universities

This last point leads to wider considerations, concerned with the management of universities, both internally and externally. What academics may well see as a threat to the academic nature of the university, others – including governments, employers, vice-chancellors and students – may see as an opportunity. It is not impossible for the Bologna process – by bringing an international perspective to what, at least in Britain, has been somewhat insular – to become a positive influence on conditions for creative academic work and for intellectual autonomy. This raises two questions:

- a) Are academic freedoms likely to be more or less constrained by the Bologna process?
- b) Is ignoring the Bologna process politically realistic?

To which positive responses are:

- Europeanisation of domestic policy is far from the 'one size fits all' suggested by critics of the Bologna Process.
- Such European ventures as the European University and the Erasmus programme show that universities and the institutions of the European Community have had conflicting visions of what European means<sup>3</sup>. Where these visions can be accommodated within a consensual decision – accounting for the ambiguities – the power of an idea

<sup>3</sup> In current British parlance, 'Europe' is still defined as continental Europe, so that Britain is not part of Europe. (Many years ago, the Dutch physicist Casimir (1973) noted that a book on birds, which appeared simultaneously in French and in English, was called 'Les oiseaux Européens' in French, but 'Birds of Europe and the British Isles' in English.) In contrast, I embrace Britain within Europe.



has been matched by agreement on the mechanism for making the policy idea operational and consistent within the larger Community project.

- There is a case for saying that as the Bologna Process has evolved, it has become more university-friendly.

However, from the point of view of this paper, two important potentially negative conclusions can be drawn:

- The Bologna process may cause tensions between on the one hand academics – who see their academic freedom curtailed, and on the other hand almost everyone else concerned with universities – governments, employers, vice-chancellors and students.
- Management may use the process in order to increase their power – over academics from within universities and over universities by the agencies of government. Both dangers are real in Britain, while in Germany at present there seems to be more good will and better intentions.

## **8 Possible effects of the Bologna Declaration on student learning**

I now turn to possible 'Bologna' effects on student learning through a study which compared the views of British and German graduates to their university experience some five years after graduation (*Johnston and Elton 2005*). Although these graduates had not been influenced by Bologna considerations or indeed by the recent changes in German higher education, their tales may give an indication of what the effect of the Bologna Declaration might be.

As has been argued, the Declaration aims at harmonising European university degree courses through a common framework of reference of easily comparable degrees and the generalisation of compatible credit systems, based essentially on the contents and levels of degree offerings. In contrast, a) and b) below indicate differences between the experiences of British and German students – experiences which in different ways are likely to exist between any two European countries – which raise issues beyond simple differences in content and level. They raise a further inherent point, listed as c). How far these 'pre-Bologna' differences will in due course still be valid under Bologna – when in Germany study will be more structured, there will be more guidance for students and courses will be of fixed length, while little will have changed in Britain – it is too early

to tell, but it is unlikely that they will disappear completely. Because of their tentative nature, these points are raised as questions:

a) Both German and British graduates talk about 'independence', but they clearly have different understandings of what this means. German 'independence' in the past related more to students being left to themselves and either sinking or swimming, whereas in Britain, 'independence' is seen as a guided development throughout a degree course. How far, recent changes in German higher education have brought the two closer together it is too early to tell; guided development is most certainly not the same as *Verschulung*, which of course exists in Britain too. In another study (*Brennan et al 2001*), although both British and German graduates put 'Development of your personality' as most important in their studies, there was regrettably no attempt to differentiate what that phrase meant in the two countries. More generally, students in both countries seemed more influenced by their learning milieus, which were very different, than by the content of their courses, and this may be increasingly so in the light of the differences arising from the British move to student centred learning. *If such findings prove still to be valid after the changes of the past decade in Germany, what do they say about the comparability of their respective degrees? And, even within a single – in this case the British – system, will there be any way to demonstrate differences arising from the radical change from teacher centred to student centred learning which has taken place selectively in Britain recently?*

b) British students must in general choose their courses before starting them; German students, at least until recently, chose them in their first or even second years of study. *What are the effects of the differences in age, personal development, the nature of 'independence' in each country, professional formation, relationship between higher education and employmen, and the role of subject knowledge, all of which come out of the study?*

c) Although expertise and specialist knowledge are valued much more now than in the past in both Germany and Britain and employability reigns supreme, underlying values – such as are inherent in the German concept of 'Bildung' (inadequately translated as 'general education') and the British concept of 'fairness' – which are deeply enshrined in history still differ. This leads to different practices which may only bear a superficial resemblance. *How does this difference affect the education of German and British students and will this difference become apparent through the Bologna process?*

## 9 Conclusion

There have been considerable changes recently in the learning experience of British students. Their effect is beginning to be noticeable and is likely to be more so in the future. How far these changes were perceived and taken into account by those who produced the Bologna Declaration is not clear, but all the indications are that the Declaration was designed with an intention of being sufficiently flexible to allow for whatever changes there might be in different systems and countries. But there is a more serious pedagogic problem, in that Johnston and Elton (2005) found differences between the experiences of British and German students which are likely to persist even after recent changes in German higher education. These suggest qualitatively distinct higher education experiences and raise issues beyond simple disparities in content and level. There were fundamental differences between perceived purposes of higher education, the teaching and learning experience, and the relationship of higher education to employment. Underlying values, deeply enshrined in history, differed. This led to different practices which may only bear a superficial resemblance. There are likely to be real differences between apparently equal offerings, differences which cannot be related to differences in content and levels. In sum, it is possible that the intended harmonisation might harmonise the tangible but less important, while leaving unharmonised the more important but intangible. The conclusion that university education overall could remain essentially different in different countries under Bologna could be a real strength in that it could lead to different countries learning from each other; that the Bologna Declaration could have a negative and constraining influence on innovation and change would be an unintended but not impossible consequence. By the time it happened it would be too late for change. If the Bologna process develops a political life of its own, it may become bureaucratic in its attempt at unifying what is disparate through agreement of what may be largely apparent rather than real. If that happens, then everyone will suffer, certainly academics and students, and probably even Vice-Chancellors, employers and Governments. It need not be so; let us hope that it will not.

Finally, the present low profile of 'Bologna' in Britain may be justifiable in that other European countries have gone out of their way to adapt to British circumstances, on the other hand, it may be merely the outcome of traditional British insularity which in this instance would surely be misplaced. Only the future can tell. Let me conclude with a saying by Einstein, appreciation of which may be crucial to success in both countries:

"Not all that counts can be counted; not all that can be counted, counts."

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**Anschrift des Verfassers:**

Professor Lewis Elton  
Centre for Advancement in Learning and Teaching  
University College London  
3 Great Quarry, Guildford, GU1 3XN  
E-Mail: [l.elton@pcps.ucl.ac.uk](mailto:l.elton@pcps.ucl.ac.uk)