



Marion von Osten

The Bologna paradox

On the contradictions in the implementation of the Bologna Criteria

The Bologna Process is typical of a new dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in the post-national politics of the Europe Union, writes Marion von Osten. Not only must the assumption be challenged that access to knowledge can be controlled via patenting and monetization, it is also necessary to place the higher education reforms in the context of the European border regime and its selective admission of "highly qualified" migrants.

At the time of writing, universities throughout Europe and the US are being occupied. In Austria, the protests that started at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna have spread throughout the country and students and teachers are expressing their solidarity with the international strike in higher education. Among the issues being criticized by the protest movement are restrictions on access, the under-funding of universities, the demotion of university education to mere schooling and the introduction of tuition fees. Also among the protesters' concerns are the European university reforms and the way they have been propagated and implemented at the national level over the last decade. The protests have made clear the contradictions between the national and the supranational goals of the university reforms.

The Bologna Declaration and its national implementation

The primary aim of original Bologna Declaration in 1999 was to create a European area for higher education and research. However what has emerged from the national implementation of the Bologna Declaration is that the implementation of these aims — such as mobility and the comparability of student performance and qualifications — often has the opposite effect to that intended. New hierarchies in university degrees, and thus in the labour market, have been introduced that contradict the goals of democratic education and employment policy. It should above all be the responsibility of national and European politics, its expert commissions and respective decision-making bodies, to criticize this development, rather than being left solely to those in the universities actually affected.

While the original Bologna Declaration envisaged trans-European degrees, it only alludes to the two-tier degree system that has accompanied the reforms as consecutive "cycles". The Austrian Ministry for Science and Research, in its report on the status of the implementation of the Bologna targets, also stated that the European reform process demanded the introduction of a system "essentially based on two main cycles", as well as "a system of credits such as the ECTS system" and "system of easily readable and comparable degrees".¹ However in Switzerland, Germany and Austria, the Bologna process has been

widely equated with the introduction of the BA and MA degrees. In Germany, the four- to five-year *Diplom* has been steadily abolished in favour of the three-year BA. Yet the Bologna Declaration and its successor agreements made no concrete suggestions in this regard. Because the Declaration is an EU directive, it can be duly interpreted and implemented only by the national actors. These national interpretations have already led to an increasing heterogenization of degrees within the EU, and in Germany even between the federal states. Ten years after the first Declaration, it is impossible to talk of homogenization and greater comparability of education in the European area. Hence the headline of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 24 November 2009: *Die Bologna Blase ist geplatzt* ("The Bologna bubble has burst").

The hierarchization of university education = "Bologna"?

However one does need to distinguish between the Bologna documents, the praxis of the Bologna Process, and the political use of the label "Bologna" in the national context. The introduction of the two-tiered degree as planned in Austria results most significantly in a hierarchization of university education that cannot immediately be inferred from the Bologna Declaration. The planned BA courses basically follow the logic of higher education as provided by a technical college — job-oriented, mid-level, applied — in new, modulated form. Now, however, this logic has been extended to degree courses formerly ran only in universities. Particularly in the recognition of degrees, the *Diplom* is now only valid as the first degree in the German-speaking space, although a *Diplom* together with a *Magister* continues to qualify the holder to go on to Ph.D., and is more than equivalent to the two main cycles. The BA, on the other hand, is the first degree in the sense of a technical college (*Fachhochschule*) degree. Unlike the *Diplom*, the BA entitles only a minority of graduates to obtain an academic education (MA/Ph.D.) in the narrower sense. In Austria, a BA qualifies its holder for no more than an upper-middle civil service position, while top-level positions, above all in research, are reserved for the minority of MA graduates.

In Scandinavia, a quota system had to be quickly abandoned when the BA failed on the labour market, while a resolution of the Conference of German Cultural Ministers on 15 October 2009 recognized criticisms from students about the "schoolification" of university courses, the restrictive recognition of academic performance, the decrease in national and international mobility, the low acceptance of the BA as a professional qualification, and the complicated credits system. In Switzerland, too, the conclusion has been reached that the change to the BA/MA has primarily served the purpose of expanding the bureaucratic apparatus however has damaged the quality of education. On top of this, economists have been able to prove that the transformation of the higher education system has swallowed up funds that should have been invested in making education more egalitarian. If the Bologna Declaration is to be implemented in the national context without having a negative effect on educational equality, then the process will need to be prolonged, coordinated and democratic.

"Bologna" in the context of transformed statehood

On the one hand, the introduction of the BA/MA system in the German-language space corresponds to the interests of national governments, who can make cuts in the education system and in teaching staff while appealing to the European Reform process. The introduction of tuition fees is also often legitimized through precisely the same appeal to the Bologna

Reforms: an example of the political instrumentalization of the process. On the whole, however, the implementation of the Bologna declaration and the boundless bureaucratization that goes with it has demonstrated retrogressive traits.

On the other hand, this new form of "governance" illustrates the way in which national governments are being confronted with a new form of statehood, where supra-state actors exercise an increasing influence over national legislation. This is by no means restricted only to educational policy, as the anti-globalization movement has made clear. What enables these supra-state specifications to be implemented is above all a highly abstract discourse appealing to the regulatory power of the free market, and to the need for competitiveness, efficiency and optimization — in other words to neoliberal ideologies. The goals of the Bologna Process are therefore also to be placed in the context of the post-national politics of the European Union, and indicate a whole new dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that does not only exist in higher education. The background to this turn is the assumption that learning processes play a dominant role in creating differentiated markets in the global competition. The knowledge now to be produced in the restructured universities is based on the assumption that knowledge can be accelerated and optimized and that access to it can be controlled via patenting and monetization; and also on the assumption that knowledge can only be coupled to concrete uses, for example the economic success of companies.² The production and distribution of knowledge is to be re-ordered according to the principles of salesmanship. However because of the lack of basis in national legislation, these arguments can only be legitimized in the national context through pressure and through pointing towards an alleged inevitability, whatever the nature of that might be.

At the same time, the paradoxes between supra-state and national agendas have opened up a new process of negotiation that recognizes the discrepancies between programme, discourse, interpretation and praxis on the European and national levels. This process has enabled a broad critique of the creeping economization and de-democratization in the German-language space and given rise to a transnational protest movement.

Broadening perspectives: A critic of the migration regime

The critique of the university reforms and the discussion about the mobility of the privileged in the economy of knowledge must nevertheless broaden its perspectives to include both the European border and migration regime and the post-colonial critic of Eurocentrism in the content of knowledge and methods with which it is produced. While younger generations of academics are increasingly recruited from the emerging nations via relaxations in the restrictive immigration laws of the European nation-states and via new forms of "education marketing", other non EU-countries' access to Europe is becoming increasingly difficult. The German immigration law of 2005 even anticipates a hierarchy between "qualified" and "non-qualified". The UNESCO Global Education Digest from 2006 shows, for example, that on an international scale it is increasingly the case that only those considered to be "highly qualified" are issued with a residence permit. According to the latest statistics, the emigration of highly educated, scientific and technical university staff to countries supposedly better equipped for education and research has also begun to be an issue for countries in northern Europe. Most affected, however, are countries whose education system is still marked and disadvantaged by the history of European colonialism. The countries who

profit from the so-called brain drain, meanwhile, are above all the English speaking nations: the US, Canada, Australia and England. According to a report of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 20 000 highly qualified people from the countries of Africa have migrated annually to Europe, Canada or the US since 2008. The minority, however, fail to have their wish fulfilled for better educational opportunities and never make it into the universities where today the protests are taking place.

¹ See bmwf (ed.), "Bericht über den Stand der Umsetzung der Bologna Ziele in Österreich 2009, 19.

² See: Yann Moulier-Boutang, "Neue Grenzziehungen in der politischen Ökonomie", in: Marion von Osten (ed), *Norm der Abweichung*, Zürich/Wien/New York: Voldemeer/Springer 2003.

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