

## **EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA - The Bologna Process and the Berlin Communiqué -**

The Bologna Declaration is a voluntary agreement signed by the Ministers responsible for higher education from 29 European countries, on 19 June 1999, establishing important joint objectives for the development of a competitive, coherent and cohesive European Higher Education Area (EHEA) until 2010. Specific objectives stated in the Declaration include: the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate; the establishment of a system of credits, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), for the transfer and accumulation of credits; the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance; the promotion of students, teachers and researchers mobility; and the promotion of the European dimension in higher education regarding curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

The Bologna Declaration acted as a catalytic agent on national reforms in many of the signatory countries. This, together with an effective follow-up structure to steer the coordination of efforts at European level, contributed to a very dynamic process which is strongly influencing the European agenda for higher education. Particularly, the fact that the Ministers are meeting every two years to take stock on developments and push objectives and achievements forward also added to the process dynamics. At present, 40 countries signed the Declaration.

The latest Ministerial Summit took place in Berlin, on 19 September 2003. The Communiqué issued by the Ministers further advances the Bologna Process on important issues relating to clarification, calendar and priorities. Specifically, the Ministers committed themselves to intermediate objectives to be reached in 2005, by strengthening *efforts to promote quality assurance systems, to step up effective use of the system based on two cycles and to improve the recognition system of degrees and periods of study.*

The full text of the Communiqué is available at <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf>. It is however worth to underline that some basic

questions in the Bologna Process, which are essential to European higher education institutions, are reaffirmed in the Berlin Communiqué, namely:

- The importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process - it is explicitly referred that *the need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level*. Within that context, the Ministers reaffirm that *higher education is a public good and a public responsibility*, which, as a matter of fact, expresses a concern quite in line with the growing expectations from society regarding higher education, not only in terms of contribution to economic development, but also and not least important, as an element of social inclusion. They also emphasise that *in international academic co-operation and exchanges, academic values should prevail*. This political position is of great relevance for the discussions relating to GATS and the attempts to consider educational services as any other marketable services.
- The recognition of the fundamental role played by higher education institutions and student organisations in the development and consolidation of the EHEA, as an ultimate way to ensure its long-term success.
- The recognition that higher education and research must be seen as two complementary dimensions to be conveniently articulated. Therefore, a commitment is assumed to develop efforts for the establishment of closer links between the higher education and research systems in each country, and for the development of synergies between the EHEA and the European Research Area, reinforcing in this way the bases for a Europe of Knowledge. In connection to the principle that research is an integral part of higher education across Europe, the Berlin Communiqué adds a new element to the Bologna Declaration, by emphasising the importance of research , of research training and of the promotion of interdisciplinary to maintain and improve the quality of higher education. Consequently, the Communiqué goes beyond the former focus on two main cycles of higher education, by

explicitly including the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process.

- The affirmation that quality of higher education *has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area* and that *consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework*. In accordance with this principle, and aiming at the development of mutually agreed and shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance, Ministers agreed that by 2005 the national quality assurance systems should: (i) clarify the functions and responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved; (ii) include in the object of quality assurance the evaluation of programs or institutions in a way that combines internal assessment, external review, participation of students and publication of results, as well as a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures; (iii) to assume the international dimension of higher education, by promoting international participation, co-operation and networking. At European level, an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance are to be pursued and ways to ensure an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies is to be explored until 2005.

In conclusion, the intermediate priorities established in Berlin bring still further momentum to the dynamics of the Bologna Process, since they help to clarify the objectives of the Bologna Declaration, they introduce additional elements regarding research which are nuclear to the concept of higher education, they shorten the calendar for the implementation of the new degree structures, for the effective and comparable operation of the national quality assurance systems and for a more effective application of the recognition systems of degrees and periods of study, and they centre the process on higher education institutions and students.

Higher education institutions and their national and European representative bodies have great responsibilities to assume, with an ample space of manoeuvre to influence the Bologna Process in a positive way. This is a grand opportunity to

contribute to the quality and efficiency of higher education. It is, above all, a paramount opportunity for higher education institutions to demonstrate and exercise their capacity for pro-active intervention and for self-regulation, counteracting visible tendencies in several countries for administrative top-down regulation mechanisms and contributing to reinforce contractual responsible approaches for higher education.

Sérgio Machado dos Santos

March.2004