BRITISH HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE BOLOGNA PROCESS: AN INTERIM ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Bologna process has attracted considerable attention and some misunderstanding. This article describes the development of the reform process since 1998, considers how it has been agreed and implemented, and seeks to explain Bologna in the context of wider European Union responses to global issues of competitiveness and free trade. The article argues that the significance of Bologna lies not only in the reforms agreed and implemented, but also in the justification it provides for varying national adaptations in major states. These adaptations are driving a broader process of change among a large number of signatories, whose capacity to affect the detail of the reform is limited. The article identifies and analyses UK policy, and draws some conclusions about the implications of the process for the teaching of Politics in UK universities.

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Introduction

The immediate origins of the Bologna process lie in a meeting held at the Sorbonne in Paris in May 1998, at which the higher education ministers of France Germany Italy and the UK agreed the text of declaration on the need to reform and harmonise higher education in the four countries. The declaration attracted favourable attention from a large number of countries (some of them present at the Paris conference) that had not been invited to sign in Paris, and with practical support from a variety of sources a follow-up meeting was held in Bologna in June 1999. The declaration which was agreed at Bologna elaborated on the Sorbonne text, set up an administrative structure to implement the agreed objectives, and approved a further conference to be held in Prague in 2001, which has since been followed by a further conference in Berlin in September 2003[1]. By December 2003, 38 countries had signed the declaration agreed by ministers in Bologna, and it has attracted interest from a range of countries outside Europe. Many of these countries are interpreting and implementing Bologna in different ways. Behind these multi-national reforms commonly referred to as the Bologna process, there is a momentum which is unprecedented, especially for a sector as conservative and national in its orientation as European higher education. The rapidity and scope of the changes envisaged appear to have caught many administrators and academics by surprise. This article provides a brief description of how the process has developed and seeks to identify and assess its main implications for higher education in the UK, especially for Political Science and International

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[1] The text of these documents can be found on

http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/bologna_declaration.pdf accessed for this purpose on 09/12/03 at 15.00hrs

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Relations. It does not enter into the detail of individual national reforms except where these are relevant to the UK, nor does it discuss in any length the implications of the process for our general understanding of European integration. Though these may be of considerable significance, that must await a different study. Reactions to the Bologna process, in so far as it has impinged on the academic community in the UK, have tended to vary between complacency and considerable anxiety. The complacency seems to be based on the view that much of this amounts to catch-up by our European colleagues, while the anxiety is rooted in suspicions about the infringement of academic independence as well as in a pessimistic view of the impact on UK higher education policy. This article argues that in different ways both of these reactions are inappropriate. The inter-governmental nature of the reforms, the voluntary nature of the national undertakings and the apparent adoption of what is been loosely described as an Anglo-American higher degree framework make the Bologna process substantially from previous efforts in this field. They should not mislead UK policy-makers into believing that for the United Kingdom this may be regarded optimistically as a process of linear convergence towards a framework similar to their own, or at worst as an unpleasant option they can choose to ignore. However, the emergence of a significant European dimension to the way UK higher education is organised should also not be over-interpreted as an inevitable threat to academic autonomy. The processes involved are complex and to some extent inconsistent over time, and the potential outcomes are uncertain in their detail. It is certain that UK higher education will be changed by them, but whether this is for good or bad depends among other things on how the British academic communities respond, not on pre-determined processes and decisions already taken.

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The Bologna process and its underlying objectives

Before analysing what the Bologna declaration says, it is pertinent to consider how it came about and how it seeks to operate. The Bologna process now consists of a set of informal administrative structures which have been in existence for over four years and which provide a means for exchanging information and for co-ordinating policy change. The Bologna declaration was signed on 19 June 1999 by Ministers of Education of 29 European countries at a conference hosted by the University of Bologna and supported by the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities. Also involved in the working group which had been established for this purpose after the Sorbonne Declaration were representatives of the Education Ministries of the EU troika (Austria, Germany and Finland), the Italian Ministry of Education and the European Commission. At the first meeting of the working group, in December 1998, it was agreed on the proposal of the Commission representative that the group should be chaired by the country holding the EU Presidency, and on the proposal of the Italian representative that France and the UK should also be invited to join the working group. To help its work the group had a report which had been produced at the behest of the European Commission on 'Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education'. On the basis of this report, the working group drafted the main declaration, which was discussed and approved in Bologna by the Ministers of Higher Education present at the conference. The conference itself was not only concerned with the Sorbonne-Bologna dynamics. It was also a working conference for the host organisations, that is, the AEU and the Confederation of European Rectors Conferences.

One of the key differences in the way the Bologna process works lies in how this combination of EU institutions, expert groups and lead organisations was able to

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achieve rapid progress on a range of issues that had in some cases been taxing the EU for a considerable time. The Bologna objectives were not entirely new. Some of them, including harmonisation of degree recognition, had been sought by the European Commission for some years without obvious success. This was the first time they had been dealt with as a single package, the first time they had been addressed in this way outside the formal EU structure by an autonomous group of governments of individual states, and the first time that a particular set of major stakeholders, that is, the groups representing heads and chief administrators of European Universities, had been directly involved from the beginning. The status should therefore be clear from the outset. As a declaration agreed by *ad hoc* procedures by a number of governments, some of them EU member states, some applicant countries and some unlikely to be in the foreseeable future (Norway, Iceland and Switzerland) the agreement is clearly inter-governmental and not formally the product of EU institutions. Also, it is phrased in such general terms that it is difficult to envisage how in this form it could be enforced through national or international courts. The Bologna declaration may be best regarded, in Hackl's phrase, as 'public international soft law'.[2] This does not mean that signatories (or indeed any European state) may not feel obliged for practical reasons to fall in with the co-ordination, but it does mean that the reasons for doing so are not directly related to legal compliance. The administrative arrangements for the Bologna process are fluid, but it should be remembered that the original impetus came from an inter-governmental agreement signed by the EU big four, who still have a major role through the follow-up group. To a considerable extent the process appears dominated by French and German

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[2] p.28 in Hackl, E., 'Towards a European Area of Higher Education: Change and convergence in European Higher Education', European University Institute Working Papers no 9, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, EUI 2001

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concerns, and especially by French activism, which increasingly is setting the pattern in degree frameworks and in quality assurance. In so far as this continues and is enhanced, other signatories risk being policy-receivers, at least in the sense that because of the weight of the larger countries in the process the general methods and principles are determined by Franco-German practice, setting parameters which others have to observe. This may pose problems of national adaptation, including for the UK, but it is not necessarily unwelcome, if it provides national policy-making elites with the opportunity to introduce long-desired reforms into a famously conservative policy sector under the cover of Bologna. The Follow-up Group and the Board which are charged with implementing the decisions and preparing the next ministerial meeting are chaired by the EU Presidency and the vice-chair is government of the next host country, which now is Norway, due to host the meeting scheduled for 2005, a country which has twice turned down the opportunity to join the EU. The next host country has in the past been responsible for providing administrative co-ordination. Since Berlin in September 2003, the pace of change has increased considerably, both in national reform programmes and in the administrative co-ordination, so that there are now monthly 'Bologna seminars', co-ordinated in practice by the European commission, which seek to push forward the spread of best practice through the open method of co-ordination (OMC). A key actor in the Bologna dynamics now appears to be the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies. This is a typical OMC institution in its structure and operations, in that it is primarily a grouping of national peak agencies set up by and supported by the European Commission for the purpose of driving national co-ordination in its policy area. The ENQA was given a mandate at the Berlin 2003 'to develop an agreed set of standards procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for

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quality assurance…and to report back'[3] Notwithstanding the choice of Norway as the next host, the ambiguous phraseology of the Bologna declaration and the heightened activism of the European Commission may suggest that the European Commission is seeking take over this role so as to integrate the Bologna process into EU business and to drive it in its desired direction. This would have major implications both for the content of the reform process and for the eventual legal status of the decisions.

The over-arching objectives of the agreement make clear that the context and the motivation are wider than the policy area contained by European Higher Education. In principle, these are is not difficult to describe. The Bologna Declaration commits its signatories

> 'to engage in co-ordinating our policies to reach in the short term, and in any case within the first decade of the new millennium, the following objectives, which we consider to be of primary relevance in order to establish the European area of higher education and to promote the European system of higher education world-wide'.[4]

This suggests that the objectives listed immediately after this statement, conventionally cited as the Bologna objectives, are secondary, and in some sense are instruments for achieving the goals referred to above, which are establishing a European area of higher education and promoting European higher education outside Europe. What these two phrases mean is therefore not insignificant. The concerns which give Bologna its impetus, and which underlie the Bologna objectives quoted

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[3] p.2, 'From Berlin to Bergen: the EU contribution', European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, Brussels 8 November 2003 A2/PVDH (Draft)

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above, are referred to explicitly in the earlier sections of the Bologna declaration, and in the Sorbonne declaration, and appear obliquely or directly in the joint statements following the Prague and Berlin conferences of 2001 and 2003. They centre on the declared commitment to 'A Europe of Knowledge', which in the Bologna declaration is referred to as

> 'an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth [and] … an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space'.[5]

However, if the 'Europe of Knowledge' is to be more than a rhetorical device, beyond the declarations about the European Higher Education Area it needs a strong commitment to implement clear and specific reforms. The Bologna declaration is one way in which the EU has sought to provide these, or at least to contribute to their development. Others are the Commission White Paper on The Role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge' (*EC (2003) 58*), the policy documents on the European Research Area, and the substantial Commission support given to co-ordination of higher education curricula in various disciplines through the TUNING programme. At the highest level of EU decision-making, these initiatives are backed by decisions of the European Councils in Lisbon in 2000, and in Barcelona in 2002, which though especially associated with issues of economic growth, employment

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[4] p.1, Bologna declaration: The European Higher Education area, Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education, convened in Bologna 19 June 1999

[5] p.1, Bologna declaration 1999

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policy and social policy, emphasised the importance of the knowledge economy in helping towards the same general goal of achieving lasting change in the overall competitiveness of the European economy.

This particular emphasis on the role of Higher Education in European economic reform is relatively new. The involvement of the EU in European Higher Education is not. Some of this involvement has generally been regarded as successful, for example the ERASMUS programme as a means of achieving student and staff mobility, which was seen prior to this debate as a good in itself, needing little further justification. Other efforts have been less successful, such as attempts to promote the goals of harmonisation of degree qualification frameworks and complete reciprocal recognition, especially beyond the rather narrow remit of professional qualifications which are achieved outside formal HE institutions. It is not difficult to see how the involvement of the EU institutions in policy relating to European HE Institutions could be seen by the EU itself as a natural development of its role in promoting political and economic integration, and to some extent a development of existing responsibilities with regard to training and with regard to the effectiveness of the labour market. However, the European commission has generally had limited success in promoting this agenda, for reasons that relate at least partly to the lack of clear authority in EU treaties. This especially applies to issues such as curriculum content and quality assurance. Article 128 of the Treaty refers to guidelines for vocational training, not to education, and a number of cases heard by the European Court of Justice have dealt with related issues, among them the extent to which education may be regarded as a service and therefore as covered by Single Market provisions. This has generally been answered in the negative. In involving itself in education, whatever the imperatives first of the Single Market and more recently of the Lisbon

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strategy for growth and competitiveness, the European Commission has usually been careful to avoid the thin ice at the margins of its treaty authority. A relevant consideration, both for the difficulty of the subject area and for the inherent political obstacles, is the importance of Universities in many EU member states as recruiting grounds for national political élites, as historically significant contributors to the development of national political identities especially in the nineteenth century, and as powerful autonomous institutions within civil society. All of these factors make Universities difficult enough for national politicians and bureaucracies to challenge. The problems facing a supra-national authority, appearing to take on entrenched and vocal national academic elites without a thoroughly-grounded Treaty authority, are even worse.

What is significant about Bologna, as Hackl observes, from this point of view, is that the process appears to be inter-governmental, driven by the nation-states themselves, and that it includes representatives of the Universities themselves as full participants[6]; this applies not only to those areas which are outside the Commission's usual remit as discussed above, such as any which touch on academic autonomy, but also to the more limited objectives which relate to areas in which the European Commission is already active, or which it might take into its remit without major issues of principle being raised. As noted above, in some of these policy areas, for example student mobility, the Commission has had relative success, and claims to have expertise greater than that of national governments or academic management. In others, such as harmonisation of qualifications frameworks and of quality assurance, the EU's involvement has either been limited to paper commitments or has been generally

[6] p.28 Hackl 2001

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without impact. Bologna therefore may be seen as a new approach to an area of EU interest whose particular configuration reflects in part the inconsistent experience of Commission initiatives since the Single European Act of 1986.

As one might expect, the momentum behind the Bologna has been followed by renewed activism on the part of the European commission, including the establishment of working groups on a variety of associated issues. At present these run in parallel with Bologna but as several commentators have suggested, they might presage the future incorporation of Bologna commitments into the *acquis communautaire*, in whatever form is most appropriate. Thus it is not fanciful to envisage that current non-binding inter-governmental commitments may acquire legal status in the EU. The public international soft law of Bologna could foreseeably become EU hard law, subject to its usual policy procedures. It would be hard politically for member states who have already signed up to Bologna to resist this process.

The Bologna declaration and the position of the United Kingdom

As discussed above, the Bologna declaration can be interpreted at a variety of levels, from the most strategic to the severely practical. The list of 'objectives' in the declaration are now too well known for detailed consideration to be necessary, and in any case we have argued above that they should be seen at most as secondary or intermediate objectives, in practice as means of enrolling the hitherto reluctant European Higher Education cohorts into the latest version of the integration mission, referred to briefly as the Lisbon agenda.

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Now that we have discussed how this policy instrument works, and identified its limitations and its potential, we can move on to consider what within the overarching objectives of establishing the EHEA and the ERA (competitiveness, adaptation to new economic and especially labour market conditions, reinforcing European citizenship, reinforcing shared values) are the specific means by which these should achieved.

The six main headings for action can be enumerated as follows:

- readability and comparability of degrees, for the specific purpose of improving the employability of graduates and enhancing the competitiveness of European HE;
- adoption of a two-cycle degree system with the first cycle a minimum of three years (this for the purpose of enforcing a harmonised reduction in the length of time spent in degree study);
- establishment of a common system of credits (ECTS was cited as an example and has become the de facto standard);
- removal of obstacles to freedom of movement of students (apparently seen in the Bologna document as a mainly Single Market issue, and therefore a residue from previous EU campaigns);
- promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance;
- promotion of European dimensions in higher education (again, at least in the Bologna declarations, a survivor from past EU programmes to promote 'European awareness').

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To these the Prague and Berlin meetings added significant 'headings for action', refined some of the principles, and set specific deadlines for implementation. The most important of the Prague-Berlin additions are as follows:

- by Bergen 2005, commitment to prioritise progress on comparability of national quality assurances systems, on the compatibility of the European two-cycle systems, and on the readability and recognition of degrees;

- recognition of the need to balance the objective of competitiveness with the improvement of the 'social dimension' in European Higher Education – meaning social cohesion and the reduction of 'social and gender inequalities';

- re-affirmation of the principle that HE is 'a public good and a public responsibility', a significant statement in the context of threats from North American private-sector education and the increasing pressure from some EU Governments for the involvement of the private sector;

- need for development of 'lifelong learning' in HE;

- emphasis on the priority of academic values and academic autonomy.

This is now a very substantial shopping-list which can keep civil servants in Education ministries throughout Europe happily employed for years beyond Bergen and probably beyond the final deadline of 2010. These refinements and additions, against the background of the increasing pace of change at the national level and the growth in the administrative support structure, reflect to some extent the traditional concerns of academic managers in the face of externally-imposed change and in some cases are a direct attempt by politicians to re-assure the academic communities that the hand-brake and the steering wheel are still available as well as the accelerator. At

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the European level, the Bologna process has already raised anxieties about the impact of increased mobility on the quality of learning, the difficulty of teaching a core disciplinary curriculum within the first three-year cycle, and the threat to relatively small disciplines (among them Political Science outside the UK) from standardisation pressures driven by representatives of larger disciplines. The list is not exhaustive. There are also those who argue, with considerable justification, that the Bologna process neglects some of the key issues facing European HE, most notably the declining unit of resource, the increasing pressure on academic research time and the increasing centralisation of national processes infringing academic autonomy. The problems for Political Science in Europe may be particularly acute where the discipline has to compete with longer established subjects which have powerful allies in ministries and powerful voices in University Senates. Pressures to establish core curricula are not yet directly evident in the Bologna documents, but it is not fanciful to identify such moves as a logical consequence of requirements to standardise and harmonise degree programmes on the basis of alleged 'best practice'. Where Political Science has to contend with Public Law, History and Sociology for the right to teach core aspects of the subject, its future may need vigorous defence. The common core curriculum may also imply practical problems of delivery for smaller departments, for example where Political Science is taught predominantly as a joint subject and where difficulties of providing expertise across the full range of required modules arise. This is likely to be an issue throughout the Bologna signatories, including in the UK.

Some of the other key issues are also relevant to the United Kingdom, and in some respects the response of the UK policy-makers has been similar to that of the colleagues elsewhere in Europe (especially, playing the European card to force through unpopular changes). However, it should be observed that for reasons which it

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is unnecessary to elaborate, and perhaps for no great merit of its current practitioners, the position of Political Science and International Relations in the United Kingdom has some major differences: in numerical terms, that is, in terms of students at all levels, staff and research output, Political Science and International Relations is one of the largest of the social sciences in UK Higher Education. Its disciplinary identity is highly pluralistic and it encompasses within it practitioners who in other European countries might well be found plying their trade in History, Philosophy, Economics or Sociology, though probably not in Public Law, which has very little substance in UK academia. This numerical strength of British Political Science and IR is especially noticeable at the level of doctoral training, in which the subject area is the largest single recipient of Research Council doctoral studentships of any of the Social Sciences. As discussed above, this does not absolve the UK from difficulties of delivery of a common core curriculum in the first two cycles; it also means that to some extent, with the exception of Public Law, the subject areas defined as Political Science in the UK encompass the wide variations visible across Europe as a whole, and that the debates around the content of a core curriculum are likely to be equally as animated as those elsewhere.

In other respects the implications of the Bologna process for Political Science and IR may not be substantially different from many of those which hold for UK Higher Education in general. The conclusions which may be drawn from this are no less worrying, even if the sources of the concern are different. The major source of concern is the widespread perception, for which the evidence is mainly anecdotal and impressionistic, that the response of UK ministerial officials has been based on the assumption, referred to in the introduction, that to a considerable extent Bologna represents the rest of Europe adopting measures similar to those already in place in

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the UK in degree structure, in quality assurance and in procedures to enhance the readability of degrees. As a result, with the exception of one major issue, the civil servant and ministerial response has been relatively inert, not to say complacent. The major issue does not concern Political Science: it is the development of so-called foundation degrees at pre-degree level to improve recruitment to declining Science subjects such as Engineering and Chemistry, about which no more needs to be said here.

If this is a fair characterisation of the UK approach, this response is troubling and it appears to be a matter of concern to senior academic managers, if reports of recent meetings of UK Vice-Chancellors are accurate.[7] There are several issues involved here, but three are fundamental. First, the degree framework systems being adopted in the rest of Europe are fundamentally different from that of the UK, most notably in the de facto emergence of the five-year two-cycle approach as the norm. In Britain the three-year Bachelors is the norm, and most Masters are one year in duration. This poses immediate problems of mutual recognition. Furthermore, the work of the TUNING programme appears to be gathering pace. The Commission document of November 2003 refers to the objective of describing 'the content of qualifications in nine different subject areas in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile'.[8] A sceptical view of this might see it a preparatory work for the development of common curricula and programmes structures with the propensity to move from the status of 'recommended best practice' to 'ignore at your

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[7] For an example of the response of the UK Quality Assurance Agency which exemplifies the UK approach, see http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/bmb/bologna_textonly.htm (accessed 09/12/03 15.15hrs); for the Vice-Chancellors view, see Europe Unit E/04/04 17 February 2004, paper on the Berlin Ministerial Summit on the Bologna Process September 2003, published by Universities UK London.

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peril'. Second, the quality assurances mechanisms being developed are radically different from those in the UK: UK quality assurance in HE is based on a highly developed and complex system of reporting and inspection of teaching and learning output, whereas the predominant approach elsewhere in Europe is input-based, relying on measurement of student learning hours and staff teaching hours. These two systems are difficult if not impossible to reconcile, and the UK approach, which is now firmly entrenched, has a substantial bureaucracy behind it and a strong political profile. This is probably the most active of all the policy areas within Bologna. ENQA has carried out experimental external evaluations in the subject areas of History, Physics and Veterinary Science, and according to the European Commission this programme, known as TEEP, 'has shown that it is possible to evaluate study programmes across borders against sets of common criteria as long as the universities agree to take the common criteria as a starting point for evaluation'.[9] The procedures for the development of these 'common criteria' are not specified in the document quoted above. Thirdly, the fee-paying regimes are fundamentally different. Some European countries do not charge fees at all, but fee levels for all UK degree programmes are relatively high compared with those countries where fees are charged. Underlying this is a diametrically different funding regime from that found in many other European countries. UK Universities have had to get used to radical changes in financial accountability and to direct dependence on fee income. This is an issue of high political salience in the UK, and one which is fundamental to UK government objectives to increase the numbers of students in HE. The disparity in fee levels is already causing problems in the development of joint European degree

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[8] p.5 European Commission 8 November 2003 A2/DVPH

[9] p.4 European Commission 8 November 2003 A2/DVPH

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programmes involving UK universities. There are other issues which for space does not permit further elaboration, in particular the limited spread of ECTS in Britain, the lack of compatibility between the diploma supplement and its British equivalent the Progress File, and perhaps paradoxically, the tradition of autonomy of British Universities compared with more centralised systems such as the French and the Italian.

Conclusion

The conclusions to be drawn from this brief review for the United Kingdom are not uniformly negative. The most obvious positive aspect is the rapidly increasing scope for the development of European-wide first and second cycle degree schemes in which UK universities can participate. Notwithstanding the difficulties, British universities seem to be showing considerable imagination and flexibility in responding to the new opportunities, though to some extent there may be unwarranted optimism about the possibility of overcoming the obvious regulatory and financial difficulties which are already emerging. British universities have traditionally had little difficulty in recruiting good students from elsewhere in Europe, even if sometimes this is because students want to develop their English-language skills rather than because of prior knowledge of the quality of the academic experience at the University concerned. The increasing capacity of other European universities to teach in English may reduce this steady in-flow, but it is unlikely to eliminate it entirely. British universities are still confident in their ability to produce not only high-quality research but also excellent teaching; the Bologna process looks likely to test the appeal of this teaching capacity severely by increasing the disparities in

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organisation and modes of regulation between UK Higher Education and everywhere else in Europe, and thus making it more difficult, not less, for European collaboration to include UK institutions. Further differences, which have not been discussed here, occur in issues of research funding and research monitoring, and these may eventually come into play as the Bologna process feeds into the European Research Area agenda as it is intended to do. In other respects, the difficulties have already been enumerated. This is not a difference in culture, standards and values. What has caused us to diverge, and thus led to the issues outlined above, are political factors reflecting changes in direction in British education, not to say British society, now in place for over twenty years, not least the huge and largely un-funded increase in student numbers over the period together with the growth of the regulatory paraphernalia associated with research monitoring. We should not forget that the Bologna process is about politics at least as much as it is about education.

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