

Department of Education Science and Training

The Bologna Process and Australia

A submission by the
Council of Australian
Postgraduate Associations
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The logo for the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) features the lowercase letters 'capa' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'c' and 'a' are connected, and the 'p' has a vertical line extending downwards from its stem. Below the logo, the full name 'Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated' is written in a smaller, sans-serif font.
Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

Introduction

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the national peak body of postgraduate student organisations representing Australia's 257,700 postgraduate students, including 47,300 research students and 261,500 students undertaking coursework qualifications.

General comments

The European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process) aims to provide a top-level framework for higher education across Europe. Bologna contains many elements that are entirely interdependent and supportive of each other, such that individual elements cannot exist in isolation. The Bologna Process is unlikely to be effective in Australia if only particular elements are selected and promoted. Specifically, the Process must include stakeholder involvement and a social dimension.

Stakeholder involvement

The Minister's preface to the discussion paper points out that issues must be 'considered in a broader context - the long-term vision for higher education in Australia'. While agreeing with this statement, we have serious reservations about this government's interest in or capacity to develop such a vision. The development of a long-term vision will require the equal input of all stakeholders, something that has been sadly lacking from the agenda for many years.

As noted in the discussion paper, student organisations have played an integral part in the Bologna Process and are viewed as equal partners. At the European level, the National Union of Students in Europe (ESIB) has representation on all Bologna committees. Most Bologna countries involve their national student organisations in government decision-making about higher education.

In 2001, the Prague Communiqué produced by European Ministers responsible for Higher Education described students as 'full members of the higher education community' and as 'competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area'.¹

A Council of Europe survey conducted in 2003 found enthusiastic backing for the idea that:

... students have a right to influence decisions and practices since they are the largest group within higher education and the main

¹ European Ministers for Higher Education 2001, 'Towards the European Higher Education Area: communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001.

*stakeholders. The students are well informed and their influence enhances the quality of higher education. Students may also be a driving force behind changes.*²

This position will be underpinned by a conference in November 2006 sponsored by the Council of Europe that will examine the role of students and student organisations in the ongoing development of the European Higher Education Area.

In Australia, government consultation with student organisations scarcely exists. Student organisations regularly contribute submissions to government and parliamentary enquiries but their input is rarely taken into consideration and students are certainly not viewed as equal partners in the decision-making process regarding higher education.³

In fact, the Government has actively attempted to silence the student voice. The anti-student organisation legislation, which is already having an impact, is likely to destroy many student organisations and make the representation of student views at the institutional and national levels very difficult.

Social dimension

The European Commission believes that the Bologna Process requires a stable funding environment and 'equitable access for all qualified students'.⁴ The Bologna Process includes a significant social dimension underpinned by the recognition that higher education is a public good.⁵ This recognition, endorsed by 45 Bologna countries, is in stark contrast to the contention of the Australian Government that higher education is primarily an individual benefit. The ESIB has stated that:

*A clear pursuit of the objectives of the Bologna process is essential for reaching its aims and ... the Bologna process must not be abused to carry out other reforms which are only on the national agenda in the name of the Bologna process.*⁶

An area where the social dimension has been undermined in some Bologna countries is in the imposition of tuition fees. In moving towards Bologna, some countries with previously only limited fees are now introducing fees more widely. In particular, the two cycle system (undergraduate followed by

² Persson, Annika 2003, 'Student participation in the governance of higher education in Europe', Steering Committee on Higher Education and Research, Council of Europe, available at <www.esib.org/documents/studentparticipation.pdf>

³ Skinner, Sally (forthcoming), 'Developing a framework for determining the quality of research education in Australia: lessons from European initiatives', *Knowledge Creation in Testing Times: Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference 2006*, 20-21 April, Adelaide.

⁴ European Commission 2005, 'Realising the European Higher Education Area: achieving the goals', Conference of European Higher Education Ministers, Bergen 19-20 May.

⁵ European Ministers for Higher Education 2001, 'Towards the European Higher Education Area: communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001.

⁶ ESIB 2006, 'Bologna Process: background', <<http://www.esib.org>>

masters) has led to the imposition of fees at the second cycle or masters level. The resultant inequity in access to this level is a concerning outcome of the Process.⁷

In Australia, full fees are already imposed on most coursework postgraduate degrees. The University of Melbourne proposal to introduce generic undergraduate degrees followed by full-fee professional level postgraduate coursework degrees may well result in similar exclusion.⁸

The social dimension of Bologna is also underpinned by a commitment to the value and facilitation of lifelong learning. In Australia, a number of recent government measures, including limits on student learning entitlements, will discourage lifelong learning.

In summary, significant changes will be required in regard to stakeholder involvement and the social dimension before there is any possibility of the Australian higher education system being compatible with the Bologna Process.

Questions for discussion

How important is it that Australia seeks to align its higher education sector with the outcomes of the Bologna Process?

- Australia would be unwise to ignore developments in the sector internationally. However, it would be equally irresponsible to simply adopt the measures suited to other countries as our own. Consideration of the issues surrounding Bologna through extensive stakeholder consultation will be required.

What are the implications for the autonomy of Australian institutions and the diversity of the sector in becoming Bologna compatible?

- A feature of Australia's higher education system is its diversity. This diversity, while often creating administrative issues, has within it the potential to encourage equity of access. This is largely due to the availability of multiple entry points to, and pathways through, higher education.

This diversity may be restricted under a Bologna-compliant system. For example, Australia's graduate diplomas allow students with an undergraduate specialisation to pursue a different, but often complimentary, specialisation at postgraduate level. Experience in Europe has demonstrated that this path is almost impossible under the

⁷ Brunner, Lea 2005, 'Bologna-reforms and tuition fees', *European Student Link*, no.29, ESIB, <<http://www.esib.org/newsletter/link/2005-01/BolognaTuition.php>>

⁸ Macnamara, Lisa 2006, 'Melbourne opts for a new model', *Australian*, 1 March, <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/printpage/0,5942,18301703,00.html>>

Bologna framework.

In Australia, movement between TAFE and university is encouraged, although often problematic. However, in European countries with the equivalent of a TAFE system, Bologna has made this movement very difficult.

The three cycle degree structure of Bologna is a framework to encourage greater convergence and should not be seen as a scheme to be imposed on the Australian system. Institutions have developed degree structures to suit their student cohorts, and the imposition of a three cycle structure may seriously disadvantage certain student cohorts. Australia should develop a statement about equivalence that would allow for the maintenance of flexibility within a broad framework.

- The ESIB has found that the three cycle structure has led to the imposition of increased barriers to equitable access. These have included additional entrance exams, and tuition fees for the next level. The structure has also resulted in increased gender inequalities in the second and third cycles.⁹
- The concept of a generalist undergraduate (cycle one) degree followed by a more specific masters (cycle two) degree has academic merit. However, given the Australian propensity for full-fee postgraduate degrees, CAPA is concerned about the potential fee implications of this structure.
- Australian postgraduate organisations report ongoing problems involving undergraduate courses/subjects that are re-badged as full-fee paying postgraduate courses. This issue has not been adequately addressed through AUQA's institutional audits. CAPA is concerned that there would be even greater scope for this under the three cycle structure, particularly if no additional funds were provided for curriculum redesign.

What risks do we run by failing to pay adequate regard to these European developments?

- The European developments are already well advanced. The Australian Government has left this discussion very late, particularly as many recent government-initiated changes to higher education have put the Australian system further out of alignment with Bologna. Engagement with Bologna may well demonstrate to the world Australia's comparatively poor education funding environment.
- The opportunity provided by Bologna for mobility will encourage people

⁹ ESIB 2005, 'Bologna through student eyes', Bergen.

to pursue research qualifications and research careers.¹⁰ Failure to pay adequate regard to these developments will impact on Australia's ability to attract and retain doctoral students and researchers over the long term. Better facilitation of mobility will enable Australia to benefit from the international circulation of researchers rather than suffer an exodus of researchers from Australia.

What further steps does Australia need to achieve a three cycle (Bachelor, Masters, and Doctorate) degree structure which is compatible with the Bologna architecture?

- In many European countries the inclusion of doctoral programs within Bologna is leading to extensive redesigning of the doctorate. Because these changes in Europe are in their infancy, it is too early to answer the questions of how these apply to Australia, and whether Australia should adopt some of these new approaches. It would be appropriate for Australia and Australian institutions to take part in these European discussions, bearing in mind that any innovative approaches may not transfer directly to the Australian context.
- The doctoral cycle in Bologna utilises generic descriptors (the Dublin descriptors) to outline the expected research and graduate attributes on completion of the doctoral cycle.¹¹ These descriptors appear to be consistent with the expectations of doctoral study in Australia.
- Bologna involves a commitment to research support across Europe. This includes, but is not limited to, doctoral research programs. The European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers are key documents in this process. These documents facilitate employment mobility and career development, which are crucial considerations for many doctoral candidates. These documents recognise that good researchers are involved in teaching, supervision, knowledge transfer and 'public awareness activities'.¹²
- Intellectual property issues are a huge concern for Australian doctoral students, particularly as there is wide variation among institutions in regard to students' rights to IP. Across Europe there is also wide divergence. We would be alarmed if Bologna compliance led to further erosion of student rights in this regard.
- Compatibility with Bologna will also involve consideration of the Australian semester structure. Particular issues are the use of summer semesters and the fact that the Australian academic year is out of

¹⁰ Liberali, Raffaele 2004, 'The European perspective', *Conference Report of Profiting from Postgraduate Talent 2004*, 9 September, UK GRAD.

¹¹ UK GRAD Programme 2005, 'Bologna Process', <http://www.grad.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/Universities?European_policy?Bologna_process/p!ekljFab>

¹² European Commission 2005, 'What is a researcher? European Commission defines roles and responsibilities', media release 11 March, <<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/282&format>>

alignment with the academic year in the northern hemisphere.

What are the implications of the Bologna Process for four-year Bachelor level qualifications, one-year Masters courses and the pathway to Doctorate studies via an Australian honours degree?

- As mentioned above, the diversity and flexibility of the Australian system must be retained. A Bologna style framework may however assist in ensuring common standards between comparable Australian courses.
- Consideration of how a research Masters fits into the framework is also required. There are also countries in Europe with similar diversity that offer an honours degree. How they are adapting to Bologna should be investigated.
- The Process must also accommodate the needs of part-time students. This form of enrolment is widespread at the postgraduate coursework level.

Is there a need to review the content of Doctorate programmes to align them with Bologna thinking, given the Bergen declaration that Doctorate programmes should include interdisciplinary training and the development of transferable skills?

- The quality and nature of doctoral education varies widely across Europe. An aim of introducing the third cycle to Bologna is to achieve greater consistency in quality. For example, supervision and the integration of students into a research culture requires extensive attention in some countries. While there is also variation within Australia, the quality of research education is increasingly of a consistent standard. Some generic skills development is already occurring in Australia.
- That said, the Bologna emphasis on preparing research students for careers outside academia and also in recognising that research students come from many backgrounds with widely varied employment experience could inform decisions about research education in Australia.¹³
- The status of doctoral students varies in Europe. Some are viewed as students, others as employees and others as something in between. This has implications for the mobility of students as their income and other benefits are not necessarily transferable.

¹³ Reichert, Sybille 2005, 'Bergen Conference of Ministers, May 2005, short summary of the parallel session on doctoral training and the synergy between higher education and research', <<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bologna/index.cfm?fuseaction=docs.list>>

Are there any implications for current funding or regulatory structures which need to be considered?

- The European Ministers with responsibility for higher education are aware that the research environment plays a crucial role in fostering new researchers. Commitment to research education must involve a funding commitment to 'offer attractive research environments for doctoral candidates'. This funding must also facilitate mobility.¹⁴
- As the ESIB has pointed out in Europe, when access to education is dependent on the ability to pay fees, that access will be unequal. This inequality exists in access to higher education in general, and most particularly in access to the second cycle.¹⁵ This is also the case in Australia. CAPA reiterates its call for the abolition of fees at all levels of higher education.
- Implementation of the Bologna social dimension will require extensive improvements to student income support, and access to rent assistance, healthcare cards, transport concessions and scholarships. This access must not be limited by age.
- The regulations and fee regime imposed on international students in Australia will militate against greater international mobility of students by discouraging enrolments of students from overseas. The federal and state governments must remove the punitive provisions of immigration legislation, extend Medicare and transport concessions to international students, provide free education to the dependants of international students, and ensure that any course fees are no greater than those paid by local students.

Do we need to undertake further work in order to achieve a credit accumulation/transfer system compatible with the ECTS?

- The application of the ECTS to third cycle doctoral programs is the subject of debate in Europe. How a credit system could work at the PhD level is unclear, as doctoral degrees do not consist of regular assessment. Australia should take part in these early European discussions.¹⁶
- The study-time expectation of students varies across Europe and is

¹⁴ Reichert, Sybille 2005, 'Bergen Conference of Ministers, May 2005, short summary of the parallel session on doctoral training and the synergy between higher education and research',
<<http://www.dfes.gov.au/bologna/index.cfm?fuseaction=docs.list>>

¹⁵ ESIB 2006, 'Statement to the Informal Meeting of Education Ministers 16-17 March 2006',
<http://www.esib.org/11convention/statmenet_english.pdf>

¹⁶ UK GRAD Programme 2005, 'Bologna Process',
<http://www.grad.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/Universities?European_policy?Bologna_process/p!ekljFab>

related to the availability of income support. This may create compatibility issues in Australia where very few postgraduate students receive income support.

- As the discussion paper acknowledges, credit transfer between Australian universities is very difficult. Our feedback suggests that credit transfer is frequently impossible and that decisions are often subjective and inadequately justified. Appeal processes are also ineffective and time consuming. Much work will be required if credit transfer is to become streamlined between Australia and other countries.

Would our national accreditation/quality assurance framework meet Bologna criteria without further modification?

- Australia's quality assurance framework is in many respects ahead of Bologna requirements. However it falls short in regard to student involvement in the development and implementation of the quality assessment process for both internal institutional and external quality assurance standards.¹⁷ For example, the AUQA audits often only consult with university-selected students and generally do not consider submissions from the institution's student organisations. While currently rarely observed, the consideration of stakeholder input is a requirement of the Bologna quality assurance process.

What further processes do we need to put in place to make sure all stakeholders within the Australian system are kept up to date with developments in and implications of the Bologna Process?

- An important element of the Bologna Process in Europe has been the active participation of all stakeholders in the development and implementation of Bologna. There are no questions in the discussion paper related to stakeholder involvement. The question above simply asks how stakeholders can be informed about developments; there is no suggestion that stakeholders will be involved in these developments.

The development of a Bologna compatible higher education sector necessitates the involvement of all stakeholders including university students and staff. This should be achieved through the inclusion of representative bodies including CAPA, NTEU and NUS as equal partners on all national level committees and the inclusion of student organisation and NTEU branch representatives on all institutional level committees.

¹⁷ ENQA 2006, Co-operation with stakeholders, <<http://www.enqa.eu/stakeholders.lasso>>; ENQA 2005, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance on the European Higher Education Area*, Helsinki <<http://www.enqa.eu/bologna.lasso>>

Would compatibility deliver real benefits for Australian graduates and employers in terms of labour mobility?

- This would require further investigation and is subject to many external variables.

Would the introduction of the Diploma Supplement in Australia be viable and beneficial?

- The intent of the Diploma Supplement is to reduce the cost of student mobility, both to the student and institutions involved.¹⁸ To achieve this aim, the Diploma Supplement must be provided free to all students. The cost of the provision of the Supplement must not be passed on through increased fees or other ancillary charges. The Supplement must be provided in a timely manner and should be issued automatically.
- The Diploma Supplement will require extensive promotion to ensure widespread industry and employer knowledge and support. This will also require a commitment by all universities, something currently lacking across Europe.
- The Diploma Supplement should include a statement about the quality and accreditation system in Australia.
- The Diploma Supplement may be useful within Australia to enhance the diversity of Australia's degree structure and ensure that students are getting the level of tuition that the course outline implies. Making the content of the Diploma Supplement known prior to enrolment may facilitate this. The related Diploma Statement must be updated whenever major changes are made to the course.
- Consideration should be given to ensuring that the adoption of the Diploma Supplement does not disadvantage international students who are coming to Australia from non-Bologna compliant countries and thus not having a Diploma Supplement for their previous study.

¹⁸ Elson-Green, Jacqui 2006, 'Bishop challenges the thinking of global education leaders', *Campus Review*, 12 April – 18 April, p.3,11.

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