Higher Education Quarterly, 0951–5224
Volume 62, Nos. 1/2, January/April 2008, pp 40–62

On Process, Progress, Success and Methodology or the Unfolding of the Bologna Process as it Appears to Two Reasonably Benign Observers

Guy Neave, Centro de Investigacão de Ensino Superior, (CIPES) Matosinhos, Portugal, and Alberto Amaral, Centro de Investigacão de Ensino Superior, (CIPES) Matosinhos, Portugal

Abstract

This article examines the Bologna Process from two main perspectives: as a dynamic strategy as well as the unfolding of the methodology employed. It argues that the latter was largely determined by the former. Three phases of development are identified; the first two of which shows that the methodology was largely determined by the need to bestow credibility on the strategy. The third phase, introduced with the recent Ministerial meeting in London in May 2007 suggests that the boundless confidence in the progress achieved at system level has now given way to a new sobriety when attention to progress is translated to institutional level. It concludes that there are excellent grounds for rethinking the basic strategy behind the Bologna Process.

> 'Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise,
> Tout va très bien, tout va très bien.
> Pourtant, il faut, il faut que l'on vous dise,
> On déplore un tout petit rien:
> Un incident, une bêtise . . . '[1] – *Ray Ventura et ses collégiens 1936.*

Introduction

On 17th and 18th of May 2007 those wedded to the advancement of the Bologna Process gathered in London for the fourth of the meetings of

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4, 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

Ministers and those responsible for higher education since the signing of the Bologna Declaration in June 1999. Amongst the items on the agenda, the so-called 'external dimension' of the process received much attention and could be said to mark the end of that self-absorption some observers outside Europe have associated with the process from the time of its launching (Marginson, 2005, p. 209–215) It is not wholly coincidental, however, that lowering the drawbridge of 'Festung Europa' should take place in London.

In recent years, British higher education policy has been deeply engaged in developing its 'world outreach'. Though this strategy does not necessarily conflict with a European commitment, the latter has tended to be looked upon with a goodly dose of detachment, born out of a particular form of British self-interest. For Britain, overseas commitment which is 'the external dimension' by another name (Neave, 2005 and 2006a, pp. 115–28) is driven by considerations – powerful, immediate and well grounded in the practice of British universities long before the Bologna Declaration was even signed, let alone advanced. For Britain's universities, there are good reasons for seeing the overseas commitment as imperative. It is not in Europe where the principle of student fees has only recently, and reluctantly, been recognised, that the benefits of full cost fees are to be had. And the ability to recruit overseas students who bring full cost fees in their baggage is a priority that few British universities have chosen to ignore.

Crucial issues

The crucial issue that follows from tabling the external dimension is how far the different systems of higher education engaged in the Bologna Process are able to absorb this new 'external' commitment? How long will it take them to do so? Last but very far from least, whether indeed this external venture is uniformly suitable to all? A more pragmatic standpoint and more realistic, would treat the 'external dimension' with greater nuance and caution. A more nuanced view would recognise that while in theory, the external dimension applies to higher education's version of Everyman, it would also note that in all likelihood, the dimension can be taken up and advanced successfully only by a few. Neither intention nor ambition (as other items already large in the Bologna agenda have shown all too often) necessarily means capacity (Neave, 2002, p. 9–18). The point made by the Commission that institutions of higher education did not observe the 'proper application' [sic] of the Diploma Supplement is a particularly cogent example (European Commission, 2007).

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

The Bologna Process has assumed a perspective, which now looks from inside out, is a significant point of departure in this everyday saga of university folk (Neave, 2006b, pp. 382–85). For that reason, the time is ripe to weigh up the process itself: how it has evolved, how its strategic thrust gathered precision, how its basic purpose underwent further elaboration as successive gatherings of Ministers piled Pelion upon Ossa[2], adding extra objectives and additional elements to the original declaration of intent? What does the unfolding of the Bologna Process tell us about how its designers and adepts believed higher education might achieve the objectives, purpose and goals the Process laid upon the 37-member states that set their hand to the Bologna Declaration? As students of comparative policy in higher education, what may we learn from Bologna as the first example of a multination agreement, unprecedented in the number of nations subscribing to its principles and unprecedented in its bid to re-engineer the continent's systems of higher education around a common profile?

Sources

In examining Bologna's unfolding dynamic, this article draws mainly upon official documents put out by organisations and groups that act as 'privileged interlocutors' in the Process: the European Universities' Association, the European Students International Bureau, the Bologna Follow Up Group, in addition to the documentation presented to, and the conclusions that emerge from, past Ministerial Meetings, issued by the host country. Finally, the documents issued by the Commission of the European Union as accounts of that body's part in advancing the Bologna Process. Such sources are valuable pointers to the assumptions that different interests entertain about how the venture ought to advance. They yield valuable insights into the perceptions of progress, backsliding, new priorities or weaknesses that different interests have identified as the Bologna Process rolls on. Statements about where the Bologna Process 'is at' are often no less revealing about where particular interests think the Process 'ought to be'.

Successive *Trend Reports*, financed by the Commission of the European Union and carried out by the European Universities' Association have both a manifest and a latent function. From the outset, their manifest function provides an interim account of what has been achieved between two Ministerial meetings. Their latent function is rather more interesting. It builds upon Bologna's basic strategy and may even be considered as an integral part of it. Thus, the exercise of monitoring has

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

both a strategic and a political function. It is not simply a technical exercise bringing the good news to the Faithful, though one should not dismiss this role. The dual nature of this monitoring exercise calls for a closer look at the basic Bologna strategy.

Competitive emulation: a basic strategy

Viewed as a strategy rather than as an enunciation of individual measures, which the Declaration set out in its six founding principles, Bologna rests on what may be described as a 'strategy of competitive emulation'. 'Competitive emulation' is a gambit well tried in 'leveraging reform', employed as much by national authorities responsible for higher education as by intergovernmental agencies with a similar remit. 'Competitive emulation' displays a certain generic similarity to what was once known in the terrible and heroic days of constructing the Soviet Union as 'Stakhanovism' or, in its American variation, Taylorism. Stakhanovism, named after the dubious achievements of Aleksei Grigorievitch Stakhanov, was a form of 'socialist competition', first introduced into the Soviet Union during the Second Five Year Plan in 1935. Pioneered by Aleksei Grigorievitch in the Donetz Basin coalfield, it became an integral part of the socialist reconstruction of the Soviet economy, rationalised technological processes, improved work organisation and raised individual output sometimes spectacularly, but at no little social cost!

Stakhanovism and Taylorism both involve the rationalisation of work the better to increase productivity. The ways 'rationalisation' is induced, are interesting. Competitive emulation involves suasion, conditionality, and incentives; physical in the case of Stakhanovism, moral in the case of Taylorism.

Whether applied to the coal hewn per miner per shift in the Donetz basin or to aligning study programmes upon the 'architecture' of Bachelor and Masters degrees in the case of institutes of higher education, moral suasion, shaming, and the implicit threat that backsliding or non-compliance bring such pressure to bear that exceptional performance by the few becomes the expected norm for the many. Competitive emulation is an exceedingly versatile strategy. It may be applied at all levels of the administrative process, across different sectors in the nation's provision of higher education, to the individual establishment, depending on the sophistication and adaptability of the national statistical office or the national organs of evaluation.

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

For this reason, competitive emulation is singularly powerful. It may be applied both domestically to the 'home front' and, at the same time, to the relationship between different national systems of higher education, often seen as symbols for national standing, efficiency, self-esteem, social responsibility, entrepreneurdom and other desirable traits in the national culture; whatever mobilising term in the current policy cycle enjoys fashionable concern amongst governments, stakeholders and consultants. Bologna's evolution from a multinational declaration to a process put in place and made explicit the terms and the measures, fields of application and procedures, instrumentality and agencies. The Declaration evolves into The Process. It becomes the prime vehicle through which the strategy of competitive emulation is defined, applied and focused, where priorities are assigned, and their achievement assessed.

The Bologna Strategy: continuity and opportunity

The strategy of competitive emulation works across multiple levels within and across nation state systems of higher education. It is dependent for both impact and effectiveness, however, on the agencies of control, verification and oversight present at nation state level. There is then a good case for seeing the Bologna Process as the direct heir to that thrust of reform which, in Western Europe, is identified with the rise of the evaluative state in the shape of agencies for quality assurance, for the systematic evaluation of higher education's output and for fine tuning institutional behaviour through agencies of accreditation (Schwartz-Hahn and Westerheijden, 2004). If one accepts that amongst the priorities of Western European governments the introduction competitive emulation was the driving force for institutional adaptation, an *Ersatz* for an earlier mode of state control through legal enactment (Neave and van Vught, 1994), then arguably Bologna has advanced that same principle further, installing it as a major component in higher education's particular version of the European dimension.

Within this setting, the Bologna strategy refocuses a technique, already proven and tested within the nation state. Bologna, judged within this particular context, is redolent more of continuity than it is of change. A considerable body of evidence is now emerging from certain member states (France, Germany and Italy in particular) that suggests Bologna provided a heaven-sent opportunity to gain new purchase over domestic issues that, earlier, tended to be delicate in the extreme (Moscati, Boffo and Dubois, 2006; Witte, 2006; Musselin, forthcoming).

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

The hidden face of Bologna

Bologna, then, has a second face, a species of policy 'spin-off' in parallel to the more visible primary task of constructing Europe 'from above'. This 'hidden face' involves governments having recourse to the declaration to justify resuscitating items on the domestic agenda, items that formally involve only a tenuous connection with the Bologna strategy (e.g. for Italy, see Moscati, forthcoming). Bologna furnishes national authorities with a new justification to reopen issues previously impervious to the best-laid plans of ministry and civil servants. In Germany, for instance, the Bologna Process reopened the vexed question of cutting back on length of university first degrees; a topic that had tried the inventiveness and patience of the best minds in the German Rectors' Conference and in the various Land ministries for the best part of a quarter century (Witte, 2006).

The strategic setting

It remains unclear how far governments signed Bologna in full and prior awareness of the advantages that could be reaped on the home front from such leverage. In turn, this raises the question whether Bologna was conceived by those signing it as the servant of the nation state or whether, on the contrary the nation state was to be construed as the trusty servant of Bologna. While the Bologna Process engaged higher education as a prime vehicle in the construction of Europe through the establishment of the European Higher Education Area and, later, the European Research Area, clearly it is not immune to the tensions that regularly and sorely tried the relationship between member states and supranational agencies throughout the 1990s (de Wit and Verhoeven, 2001). Here was a paradoxical situation indeed. One of the major considerations behind the Sorbonne Meeting the year before Bologna between the Ministers responsible for higher education in Britain, France, Germany and Italy was the need, if not to break the deadlock between two contrary visions of Europe, then at least to ensure some tangible progress by outflanking them. The two conflicting visions were whether or not European construction should rest on a federal or a unitary, base. To the ministers involved in the Sorbonne meeting, rapid progress was imperative to break political logjam that threatened to bring the construction of Europe to a shuddering halt. A clear demonstration was needed that progress in building Europe was possible in a domain where the tensions between a federal versus a unitary vision of Europe

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

were not so directly involved (Marçal Grillo, 2003). Such considerations in turn shaped two other dimensions, held essential to the Bologna strategy: its 'broad front approach' and its remarkable speed.

The anatomy of a strategy

Once the six principles in the Bologna Declaration are examined as the basis for developing a coherent strategy, the 'broad front' approach emerges strongly. The 'broad front' strategy covers two dimensions: an innovative element and an element of consolidation. The former turned around the 'new architecture' built around the bachelor and masters degrees, which the Berlin Ministerial meeting of 2003 extended to include doctoral level study. Also included in the 'innovatory items' was the principle of 'readability' of qualifications. These two components are innovative precisely because they can operate only on a transnational footing. They made little sense save when applied in a multi-system arena. By contrast, the element of consolidation built out from principles that already figured as matters of central concern and on-going reform in member states systems of higher education; to wit, transparency, employability, mobility and quality.

Yet, the identifying characteristic of the Bologna strategy must surely be the unprecedented weight placed upon schedule and timing for completing the original six Bologna principles. This objective, however, is readily graspable provided it is *not* viewed within the context of the dynamics of institutional change and adaptability. For in truth, interpreted from this latter standpoint, it runs counter to all we know about the pace of institutional change and the complexities attendant upon implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984; Cerych and Sabatier, 1986; Neave, 2002).

Precipitation explained

If, on the one hand, this schedule is placed against the political context that led up to Bologna and on the other, one accepts that the Bologna strategy is grounded on the use of competitive emulation as the mobilising instrument, its rationale becomes evident. The need for expedition was dictated first, by the political objective originally raised at the Sorbonne Meeting of May 1998, namely, to give demonstrable proof of the European Union's ability to progress in an area with immediate impact on, and importance perceived by, its citizens. Introducing a formal and public schedule for completing the reforms from the very outset was

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

indispensable if the strategy of competitive emulation was to have any consequence. Setting the year 2010 as date line by which the six fundamental principles were to be firmly embedded in the higher education systems of the signatory states served to keep pressure up and to sustain the reforming impulse. Without such leverage, there could be no laggards and, for that matter, still less praise for enthusiasm either!

Plans and action

Neither the broad-front strategy nor the speed of advance were uncontested, as was who should determine the momentum of change. For Viviane Redding, Commissioner for Education and Youth, speaking at the Berlin Meeting of Ministers (Redding, 2003) and the ESIB 4 years later (ESIB 2007, p. 5), a broad front strategy was just that; all issues were to be tackled simultaneously. Seen retrospectively and reading between the lines of the various *Trend Reports*, it is clear that a broad-front strategy did not correspond, in the slightest, to the way member states set about the Bologna Process. On the contrary, the strategy of many signatory states was to tackle individual issues one after the other, using success in one issue as a breakthrough subsequently to tackle others. These two approaches are not necessarily incompatible, provided the central thrust of reform focuses on the overall strategy rather than its individual components. From a strategic standpoint, the six principles (three more had been added in 2001 at the Ministerial Meeting at Prague: lifelong learning, student participation and making the European higher education area attractive) were mutually supporting. Success in one served to strengthen the credibility of the general strategy and gave governments an enhanced leverage over the remainder.

Nevertheless, the disagreement between proponents of a broad front strategy and the supporters of an initial penetration (by concentrating on one issue at a time to raise the profile, plausibility and credibility of the remainder) *was* serious particularly when the Bologna Process began to acquire its own momentum as it did after 2003. The risk lay not in the viability of the strategy; though this point has been made.

Complementary imaginings

The risk lay at the European level and more particularly in the perception such a tactic of proceeding '*par petits paquets*' had upon the overall strategy itself. Seen from this angle, the Bologna strategy was directly

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

subordinated to the capacities and will of individual member states. The risk in 'proceeding by open order' was that it could be interpreted at a European level as an inability, or worse still reluctance, to engage upon a strategy the coherence of which ought to be contested by none. Such misgivings were themselves an error for they confused the *image* such a perception conveyed of the strategy with the *substance* of the strategy itself. In effect, the Bologna strategy of competitive emulation relies as much upon the *image* conveyed of advancing achievement and achievement advanced as it does on the often-meagre reality of what indeed has been achieved. From the very first, the *image* of success rapidly gained was an integral part of Bologna's basic strategy. Thus, tension between the supporters of a broad-front strategy and those pragmatists who backed a more selective and focused operational agenda the better to advance the Bologna strategy in depth, scornfully described in certain documents as the '*à la carte*' approach to the Bologna strategy, was no idle matter.

To move forward rapidly and successfully, the Bologna strategy needed to demonstrate as much to member states as to the higher education and scholarly communities generally, that it had moved forward rapidly and successfully. Yet the evidence presented to support advance was far from being solid. Here the work of the Bologna Follow Up Group's Stocktaking Exercise repays closer scrutiny. In support of the general proposition 'the Bologna Process is working' (Bologna Follow Up Group, 2005 p. 26), the proportion of student enrolment in the two-cycle system was invoked:

> In 17 countries, 81–100 per cent of students are enrolled in the two-cycle system in 2005, in six countries 51–80 per cent and 10 countries 1–24 per cent. In just three countries, no students are enrolled in the two-cycle system in 2005. (Bologna Follow Up Group, 2005, p. 34)

These seemingly precise figures assumed a slightly battered appearance in the paragraph that followed; 'It should be noted that these figures are broad estimates based on the limited information that was available to the National Reports and the Eurydice summaries' (Bologna Follow Up Group, 2005, p. 35). Those concerned with methodological nicety would certainly pose the question, 'How broad?' assuming, of course, all were agreed on what constitutes broadness. Others might worry about the quality of the sources, quite apart from the uniform accuracy of the summaries.

This is an excellent illustration of the basic weaknesses of the strategy, namely that the image manufactured often bore a tenuous connection

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

with what policy analysts are wont to call 'grounded reality' or, in this particular instance, reality pre-processed by the various authors of the national reports and summaries.

Advance, even on tenuous evidence, was crucial because the leverage governments could bring to bear on their own higher education systems, in turn, depended closely and intimately on the Bologna Process being seen to advance rapidly and successfully. Hence, the price of credibility and thus the leverage governments could exert from the outset was inseparable from advance demonstrated without peradventure. The Bologna strategy was hostage to the image it set out to create for itself just as it was victim of the image created to justify it.

The sweet smell of success

Succinctly stated, the basic Bologna strategy of competitive emulation takes on plausibility only when 'successful'. Hence, demonstrating success was not simply a matter of showing how far strategic activities derived from the nine principles had been taken up, engaged upon, advanced and achieved. In the initial phrase up to 2003, one of the more interesting features held up as success was the capacity of member states to enact the principles they had agreed upon. Thus for instance as evidence for progress, the Trends Report of 2003 noted that 80 per cent of the states signatory to the Bologna Declaration 'have the legal possibility to offer the two-tier structures *or are introducing these*' (Reichert and Tauch, 2003, pp. 7; *our italics*).

Two points arise here. The first has to do with the collapsing together of what are two clearly separate categories: those States that *have* introduced legislation and those that *are introducing* it. Had the difference between achievement and intention been recognised, the gratifying statistic of 80 per cent would certainly have been more modest.

The second point relates to the notorious weakness of legislation as a pointer to developments at institutional level. In many countries, amongst which France, Spain, Italy and Portugal, it is not the passing of a law that spurs action on. It is the '*decret d'application*', or its equivalent. Without it, laws may indeed be passed – directly to the archives and into oblivion. The passing of legislation may tell us something about intention or even commitment as a minimum condition. What it does not tell us is the extent of that commitment. Commitment is largely a function of the weight attached to the various procedures and the seriousness in which the passing of laws is regarded in a particular political system.

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Not surprisingly, though later, the use of legislative capacity to illustrate progress was subject to second thoughts (Reichert and Tauch, 2005, Executive Summary, para. 10).

Methodology and the quest for success

The quest for evidence to sustain success is shaped by political priority. From the standpoint of scholars and analysts of higher education, it stands as a methodological affair of the utmost nicety, if only to see how methodology evolved along with strategy. Only in the *Fifth Trend Report* of 2007 did the importance of methodology receive the slightest acknowledgement when the combining of one study of both qualitative and quantitative techniques was announced to a wondering world (Purser and Crosier, 2007). In usual circumstances, quibbling over methodology is one of the few pleasures academia grants the pedantic. However, since the quest for demonstrable success in the Bologna Process intertwined image and strategy, it follows that methodology was also shaped by the same considerations.

Methodological niceties

The methodology employed in quasi-official documentation that accompanies the Bologna Process falls into three clear chronological periods, from 1999 to 2003, from 2003 to 2007 and from 2007 onwards. During the first phase, the methodology developed is best described as 'hortatory' on the one hand or 'contextualising the Bologna Declaration within the then current framework of higher education policy' on the other. Both activities entailed a 'pump priming exercise', the purpose of which was to transfer attention from the six individual principles and the policies, each of them separately engaged at nation state level, onto the Bologna Process as the common vehicle for their future advance at European level. Particularly revealing in this tactic of 'credibility building' were the conclusions reached in *Trends II* (Haug and Tauch, 2001, pp. 1, italics added):

> The Bologna Declaration is on all agendas . . . It is mostly seen as confirming national priorities: this is the process' biggest strength, i.e. it 'crystallises' major trends and reveals that issues and solutions have a European dimension . . . The process is not (or no longer) seen as an intrusion, but as a source of information on *the most suitable way* (our italics) forward for Europe.

Leverage over individual items in a strategy of reform is largely a function of the ability to persuade those about to have reform done to

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

them that wide consensus already exists in favour of those measures the reforming wish to advance. It is not surprising that *Trends II* discovered a pleasing agreement around the core items of the Declaration: 'unanimous support to [sic] the promotion of the mobility of students'; increased awareness 'that employability is an issue all over Europe'; 'most countries now seem to understand "competitiveness" in a positive sense and to endorse the need for their higher education systems to be "attractive" '. On so wide ranging a consensus, individual signatory states could claim the moral leverage required to use Bologna as an additional blessing for policies many had in hand before Bologna.

These were powerful claims and especially so in such sensitive areas as 'competitiveness' and 'employability', which represented a fundamental departure from earlier notions that turned around employment, and which stood as an explicit neoliberal reinterpretation of higher education's purpose. Such findings were an integral part of a manufactured consensus without which the Bologna strategy risked progressing less briskly. To whom were the advantages of competitiveness revealed? The answer is as astounding as the technical and ethical implications that trail in its wake. The prime interlocutors and purveyors of information were 'mainly based on information provided by the Ministers of Higher Education and the Rectors' Conferences' (Reichert and Tauch, 2003, pp. 2).

From a strictly methodological perspective, canvassing the opinions of precisely those who had been instrumental in the very launching of the Bologna Process is unlikely to reveal second thoughts so soon after their first cogitations had been publicly consecrated in the form of a declaration. Which leads one to suggest that the purpose of the Trend Reports that appeared during the first phase of the Bologna Process had nothing whatsoever to do with either progress or achievement so much as justifying and creating plausibility for a strategy that the very same interests and agencies had agreed amongst themselves between 2–4 years earlier to develop. Here is a rare example of 'a self-justifying ordinance'. On such a methodology was the Bologna Declaration transformed into the Bologna Process. No one can fail to be a little bemused by the sheer surrealism of the notion that either ministers or rectors would fail to confirm those self-same priorities they had themselves so recently agreed on.

The first phase and Dr Pangloss

Thus, the first phase of the Bologna strategy, saw investigation engaged in what appears akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the null

© *2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.*

hypothesis (that no advance has been made) shone largely by its absence. Indeed, if one pores closely over the first two *Trend Reports*, success was never in question. Rather, the central issue was simply the degrees of success, of acceptability and of enlightenment that remained to be ascertained and to be proved 'All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'.

The second phase: 'take up' and the institutional dimension

The second phase in Bologna's methodological saga covers the 4 years from 2003; from Berlin onwards. It marked developments in two domains: the admission of interests and constituencies other than governments, ministers and rectors, for example, employers and students (brought in under the Prague Ministerial Meeting of 2001); and finally, the rectification of that most bizarre of all omissions, academia itself, which eventually took place in 2005 at the Bergen Ministerial Meeting, 6 years after the launching of the Declaration. The second development saw the focus of attention shift from the acceptability of Bologna within the world of politics to the take-up within the groves of academia of the operational consequences that flowed from the nine Bologna principles.

The transfer of the centre of gravity from the political domain to the institutional dimension, from the *pays politique* to the *pays reel*, reflected a parallel realignment in methodology and in the Bologna strategy itself. The quest for leverage moved on from the issue of political acceptability of the Bologna principles to how far the operational consequences of those principles had penetrated to the individual university. The 'closed cycle' style of eliciting opinion, which characterised the first 4 years of the *Trends Reports*, was replaced by a series of 62 site visits (Reichert and Tauch, 2005). Consensus building was replaced by a derivative form of impact study (Neave, forthcoming) designed with two ends in mind: first, to ascertain the degree of 'institutional take-up' and thus how far the Bologna Process itself was 'on course'; and second, by demonstrating success in take-up, to extend leverage and bring competitive emulation to bear on the institutional level.

Weaknesses

The tasks addressed in the second phase were not made easier by the impression of rapidity and success that flourished during the first phase which had shaped expectations in the political domain. From a methodological standpoint, two very evident weaknesses stood out; the first

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

was the choice of 'soft' items as proof of progress. Amongst them figured the attitudes of different interests; leadership and the academic estate as individuals. The second entailed an elastic understanding of precisely what was involved in institutional 'take up'.

Using attitudes to demonstrate progress is a mixed blessing. One can never be sure whether attitudes are enduring, passing or merely formed at the moment an individual is put to the question. Similarly, the issue of 'take up', which is often the start of 'a highly complex cultural and social transformation that . . . set(s) off a chain of developments with their own dynamics in different contexts' (Reichert and Tauch, 2005, Executive Summary, para. 5, p. 1) rather than its happy ending.

Take up, however, is a minimal definition that ends only when the new practice is firmly embedded in the institution. Four separate stages may be identified under the general rubric of implementation: 'take up' by the institution, internal negotiation, execution and finally, embedding. Following the classic studies of implementation in higher education (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984; Cerych and Sabatier, 1986), a large number of veto points are present. They often ensure that take up, though a form of progress when set against 'no take up', can presume completion and still take success less for granted, above all, when both are conditioned by an unyielding schedule.

During Bologna's second phase, by moving into the area of institutional take up, strategy faced a vastly more complex task; namely how to authenticate what had been achieved, while showing 'that the Bologna Process is working. Almost all participating countries have embarked on the reform process along the lines articulated by Ministers in Bologna in 1999' (Bologna Follow Up Group, 2005, pp. 26). In effect, the strategy and those dedicated to driving it forward found themselves impaled on the horns of a most unpleasant technical dilemma, which turned around the question of aggregation versus plausibility.

Problems

One of the problems the student of higher education often faces is that developments perceived tend to be a function of the level of analysis. Advance, progress or 'take up' at the level of whole national systems, often masks spectacular deviance when re-examined at lower levels – at the regional level and most assuredly so at the level of the individual establishment. At a high level of aggregation, what may cause self-congratulation often leads to the wringing of hands once attention penetrates below those heights (Neave, 1996, p. 26–41). What is presented as

© *2008 The Authors. Journal compilation* © *2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.*

plausible *at system level* does not always command the same credibility once focus shifts. For a state to embark on a new architecture of studies is very far from having every single university within the self same nation in a condition of similar beatitude. When the level of analysis moves below the nation level, earlier claims to plausibility are often subject to severe strain, unless one re-aggregates the earlier results in the light of the information provided from the lower level. Plausibility claimed on the earlier basis of the higher level of aggregation often is compromised by the results obtained from disagregation. Disagregation raises a very ancient issue; namely, whether earlier results were the outcome of choosing criteria less essential than nominal or criteria chosen simply because they fitted the image one sought to convey.

Faulty strategy

In all fairness, however, the Bologna strategy could not avoid the institutional level. It faced a task that in all logic ought to have been undertaken as a *preliminary* to the reforming impulse rather than as a *consequence* of it. For in seeking to verify take up, for example, of the new architecture of studies, of credit transfer, the use of the diploma supplement, strategic outcomes no longer rested solely on ministerial will. They rested on the capacity of the individual institution. This 'transfer' in turn raises the issue of what conditions present at institutional level serve to expedite 'take up' in the first place and, in the second, optimise the attendant stages of negotiation, implementation and embedding.

Thus, those entrusted with tracing the strategy's application were rapidly obliged to consider other factors and contingencies. How, for instance, could the new demands Bologna entailed, be accommodated within existing institutional constraints upon budget, teaching load, student contact hours and this, in establishments already groaning under the routine duties made heavier as a result of a decade of unrelenting reform at national level, in addition to so radical and additional an overhaul the Bologna strategy demanded (Veiga, Rosa and Amaral, 2006)?

The Bologna strategy suffers from a major weakness in both conception and in execution. Apologists will certainly point out that the sense of urgency, which hung over the birth of the Declaration, did not permit such luxuries as prior assessment of the capacity of the universities in Europe to adapt. To the '*pays politique*', speed was of the essence. Yet, from the standpoint of shaping of strategy, there is nothing more risky than committing oneself to a course of action without knowing whether

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

or not (or, which is worse, taking for granted that) the prime vehicle for the strategy's successful outcome possesses the capacity, let alone the will, to carry the strategy out.

The Bologna strategy was launched with very little, if any, prior attention paid to the consequences that more than a decade of reform at nation state level had already wrought upon the capacity of universities and institutions of higher education to assimilate the additional demands the strategy imposed. Viewed from this perspective, though the Bologna process crowned more than a decade of reform, it also added to the ongoing and spreading burden higher education struggled to master.

The third stage: *un incident, une bêtise . . .*

The London Ministerial Meeting of May 2007 marks the third stage in the methodological evolution of the Bologna strategy, a feature the writers of the *Fifth Trends Report* were at pains to emphasise. Why they made this point at all is an interesting issue in itself. To the sceptical and scholarship, in contrast to politics, involves the systematic suspension of belief, the sudden *engouement* for methodological nicety would have been a non-issue, unless one had relied on hearsay, on unsystematic impressions, or had been economical with rigour and objectivity during the earlier stages in tracking the Bologna adventure. There are, however, two further complicating factors: first, that findings, which emerged from analysis at a lower level of disagregation, undermined the plausibility of claims made earlier. They weakened the basis on which competitive emulation rested. Since competitive emulation was the heart of the Bologna Strategy, the credibility of the latter was also at stake.

The second possibility is the type of information gathered to ascertain progress became increasingly dysfunctional. In the quest for consensus and through consensus, demonstrable progress, little attention was paid to views that questioned the ways to achieve the Bologna objectives. The outward harmony of discussion was thus preserved at the price of eliminating disagreement from the record. The debate over accreditation at the Salamanca Convention of 2001 is a good illustration. It raised fundamental issues about the strategic consequences for higher education in Europe of such a procedure and generated no little dissent. To deduce this from the official record of that occasion would demand insight, imagination and sensitivity of a very high degree indeed.

> . . . representatives of higher education institutions, as well as student organizations, quality assurance agencies, national higher education authorities

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

> and intergovernmental bodies discussed accreditation as a possible option for higher education in Europe, particularly as a contribution to the completion of the European higher education area called for in the Bologna Declaration. (Message from the Salamanca convention, 29–30 March 2001).

By excising dissent, the better to sustain the credibility of progress and to uphold competitive emulation, which was dependent on, and the instrument of, progress, the Bologna strategy created its own obscurities. The account no longer provided a credible leverage. No longer did it convey a narrative that reflected the conditions under which institutions laboured to advance the Bologna strategy. '*Trop de succès, tue le succès*' (too much success kills success off).

The methodological opening of Pandora's Box

The much-heralded refinement of methodology announced in the *Fifth Trend Report* broke with the way the Bologna strategy was perceived by those advancing it. By moving into the institutional level, the issue was solidly joined as to whether or not the Bologna strategy was easily reconcilable with academia's daily lot. Or, indeed whether or not the interpretation that national governments placed on Bologna and the opportunities it presented for the furtherance of national policy were reconcilable. In Germany, Austria and Italy for example, one of the benefits governments hoped would be bestowed on them was considerable savings in cost as study duration was reduced (Fulton, Amaral and Veiga, 2004). Bologna resuscitated a basic issue all-too-long delayed; namely, the question of ways, means and very particularly, the sheer cost involved, both human and financial. Also posed was whether or not governments ought now to consider 'targeted incentives' for universities to move forward rapidly in fulfilling Bologna's basic terms: comparable qualifications, curricular overhaul and mobility for staff, students and researchers (European Commission, 2007, pp. 6).

The Commission's suggestion of 'targeted incentives' should not be passed over lightly. Irrespective of whether or not governments take the point up, the proposal is interesting for the implications it raises in connection with the Bologna strategy itself. The implication is that competitive emulation has reached its limits. It remains to be seen whether the Bologna stakes are to be urged on by that instrumentality that is higher education's equivalent of whip and spurs; such as performance-related funding which is another way of describing targeted incentives. Some member states have already introduced incentive-based funding: certain Autonomous Communities in Spain for example

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

(Canarian Government Council for Education Culture and Sports, 1996) or, like Portugal, are actively considering it.

The major change in the third stage of the Bologna strategy was not confined to an enhanced technical sophistication, which added seven focus groups to the 15 site visits and the 900 odd questionnaires sent out to institutions (Purser and Crosier, 2007). It also injected an evident evaluative (or judgmental) element, far beyond the established binary method of counting the number of institutions that had or had not 'done those things that ought to be done'. This self-critical element, nuanced though it, sets the *Fifth Trends Report* aside from its predecessors. Regrettably the report did not penetrate deeper into examining those procedures underlying the rise in the proportion of higher education institutions with all three cycles 'in place' from 53 per cent in 2003 to 82 per cent in 2007 (Purser and Crosier, 2007, slide 6). Yet by no means, all establishments of higher education in Europe teach up to the doctorate. It is then rather important to know what proportion of institutions in Europe do officially pursue work up to this level and, rather more to the point, that the 900 odd included in the survey *are* representative of this obdurately Humboldtian world.

Virtue resuscitated

The virtue of the *Fifth Trends Report* lay in the hesitant but nevertheless rewarding first steps beyond the purely quantitative and the nominal. In place of an earlier unanimity amongst rectors about the significance of graduate employability (Reichert and Tauch, 2003, pp. 5), 'trends reveal that there is still much to be done to translate this priority into institutional practice' (Purser and Crosier, 2007, p. 2). A further example, illustrating how earlier plausibility became questionable with changes in the level of analysis, emerges from successive accounts of the development of the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS). Thus, in 2003, according to *Trends III*, two thirds of higher education institutions used ECTS for credit transfer, 15 per cent used a different system and three quarters of those contacted claimed to have introduced a credit accumulation system (Reichert and Tauch, 2003, pp. 10). Introduction is one thing, correct usage another. Thus, 4 years on, 'There remains much work to be done to ensure [HEIs] use the Diploma Supplement correctly. Incorrect or superficial use of ECTS is currently still widespread. Such usage hinders the restructuring of curricula and the development of flexible learning paths for students' (Purser and Crosier, 2007 p. 2).

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

The end of instant success and the rise of a new sobriety?

The striking feature of the Bologna strategy in its third stage is the recognition that while instant success may encourage effort, it is a gambit limited in usefulness and applicability. As an assessment of policy, the latest report, unlike its predecessors, no longer resembles an unwitting pastiche of that racy French song from the 1930s: '*Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise*'. Readiness to associate success with the most tenuous of evidence yields to a cautious hesitancy on the one hand, and to greater concern with the conditional nature of current developments, on the other.

The institutional level creates its own sobriety, just as it creates its own exigencies. Once the Bologna strategy permeates to the institutional level, the task of gauging progress takes on a different complexity. Such complexity can no longer be served by recourse to facile legislative and legalistic criteria and still less by plotting the numbers of students enrolled on courses nominally associated with the 'new architecture'. It is, after all, the easiest thing in the world to change the nameplate on the departmental door, or to re-label the titles of programmes, units and courses while preserving the contents as ever they were, though both can easily be seen as institutional 'take up'. Henceforth, the challenge the Bologna strategy faces is very similar to that which earlier and at nation state level, accompanied the rise of the evaluative state. That is to say, whether 'take up' is nominal – a disguised tokenism – or essential and fully grounded in institutional reality (Neave 1998, 2006c; Huitema, Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2002).

That a self-induced euphoria yields ground before a new sobriety will be as welcome to the scholarly community as it will be on its own account. However, the new sobriety also suggests that Bologna's earlier battle honours are beginning to look a little tattered. Take for instance, the new degree structures. According to the *Fifth Trends Report* 'changes in degree structures so far seem only to have had only a marginal effect . . . many national funding systems currently act as a disincentive to mobility, rewarding institutions that retain students, but not providing incentives to mobility' (Purser and Crosier, 2007, para 8, p. 4). Nor is this the only cause for concern. Neither governments nor institutions, the report remarks, appear to have the ability 'to communicate the results and implications of the structural and curricular reforms which have arisen from the Bologna Process . . . There is . . . a danger that the new degrees, particularly at the first cycle, will be misunderstood or mistrusted within the labour market' (Purser and Crosier, 2007, para. 12,

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

p. 5). Earlier Italian experience echoed this warning (Boffo, 2004, p. 371–381).

The conditions of consolidation

Clearly the Bologna strategy requires radical rethinking for the self-evident reason that a strategy designed to mobilise can only, with very great difficulty if at all, be bent to another strategic purpose, such as addressing the task that Europe's universities and colleges are now engaged upon. This entails ascertaining, consolidating and communicating internal reform in a way that has satisfying meaning as much for students and their parents as it does for those who, in lofty places, set the framework of that strategy. The strategy of generating plausible results has served its time. What matters now is a strategy that sets about improving and redesigning the quality of the information purveyed, (Department for Education and Skills, 2007, p. 10) its clarity and eliminating avoidable ambiguity.

Conclusion

This article has examined the Bologna Process as the unfolding of an overall strategy and from the evolution in the methodology employed. The latter, it was argued, was largely determined by the former. Three phases in the development of methodology were identified, the first two showed a close interplay between strategy and methodology. This interplay had methodology acting to bestow credibility on the strategy; to demonstrate both its success, its impact and thus rapidly to substantiate consensus; and to plot both its geographical extent and its penetration into the national fabric of higher education. The quest for demonstrable success was as important to the signatory states as it was for the viability of the strategy itself. It afforded an additional and important leverage over internal reform at nation state level while uniting both national effort and reinforcing the European dimension around policy, grounded in the concept of competitive emulation that provided a central driving force to the overall Bologna Strategy.

An examination of the third phase in the methodological and strategic unfolding of the Bologna Process reveals a situation where increasing concern at progress on the institutional level has ousted the boundless confidence that earlier accompanied the registration of consensus and the response it generated at the level of individual higher education systems. In short, the methodological complexity in keeping track of the

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Bologna Process at institutional level has ushered in a new prudence in interpreting progress achieved. By acknowledging this, the third stage also recognises the fundamental difference between 'taking up' the principles set out in the Bologna Process and their completion.

The main question the change in methodology poses, so evident in the third stage, is whether competitive emulation, the heart of the Bologna strategy during the first two phases, is sufficient to ensure the attainment of that basic strategic objective, which accompanied the Bologna Process from the outset; namely, completing the embedding of the new degree structure and its instruments of qualification by the year 2010. Finally, if adequate and proper account is to be taken of Bologna's dynamic within the universities in Europe, the basic strategy itself needs to be rethought.

Notes

1. 'Things are just fine, Madame la Marquise,
   As fine as they could be.
   Still, there's something that you'd best know.
   A minor thing, a bit of bother . . . '
2. Editor's note: for those unaware of this classical allusion that has been round for about 2000 years, the authors indicate that it means piling one thing on another to reach grotesque heights. Mout Pelion and Mount Ossa are Greek prominences but still the highest in the Peleponese.

References

Boffo, S. (2004) Universities and Marketing Mass Communication in Italy. *Higher Education Policy*, 17 (4, December), pp. 371–381.

Bologna Follow Up Group (2005) *Stocktaking Exercise*. Bruxelles: Universite Libre de Bruxelles.

Canarian Government Council for Education Culture and Sports (1996) *Programme Contract as provided for under the 6/1995 Territorial Act, 1996–1998*. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, (English translation) February 1996.

Cerych, L. and Sabatier, P. (1986) *Great Expectations: Implementing Reform in Europe's Higher Education*. Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books.

Department of Education and Skills (2007) *Bergen to London; Secretariat Report on the Bologna Work Programme 2005–2007*. London: Department of Education and Skills, p. 10.

European Commission (2007) *Towards the European Higher Education Area: Responding to Challenges in a Globalized World*. Conference of European Higher Education Ministers, Contribution of the European Commission, Bruxelles. May 17–18, 2007.

European Students International Bureau (ESIB) (2007) *Bologna with Student Eyes*. Executive Summary. Press Release.

Fulton, O., Amaral, A. and Veiga, A. (2004). Report of Site Visits of an External Monitoring Team to the University Ca' Foscari (Venice) and the University of Urbino. *Monitoring the Harmonisation Process Of Tertiary Education Systems in Some Countries of the European Union (follow up of the Bologna and Prague Conferences) with Specific Reference to the Italian Reform*. Bruxelles/Geneva: European Universities Association.

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Haug, G. and Tauch, C. (2001) *Towards the European Higher Education Area: Survey of the Main Reforms from Bologna to Prague*. Conférence des Recteurs Européens, Geneva.
Huitema, D., Jeliazkova, M. and Westerheijden, D. (2002) On Phases, Levels and Circles in Policy Development: the Cases of Higher Education and Environmental Quality Assurance. *Higher Education Policy*, 14, pp. 197–215.
Marçal Grillo, E. (2003) European Higher Education Society." *Tertiary Education and Management*, 8 (3), pp. 3–11.
Marginson, S. (2005) Cities of Angels and the Barbarians at the Gates. In J. Enders, J. File, J. Huisman and D. Westerheijden (eds.), *The European Higher Education and Research Landscape 2020*. Brno, Czech Republic: Vuilin Publishers, pp. 209–215.
Moscati, R. (Forthcoming) The Implementation of the Bologna Process in Italy. In A. Amaral, P. Maassen, C. Musselin, and G. Neave, (eds.), *Bologna, Universities and Bureaucrats*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
Moscati, R., Boffo, S. and Dubois, P. (2006) *Changing Governance in France and Italy*. Presentation to the 28th EAIR Conference, August 30–September 1 2006, Rome.
Musselin, C. (Forthcoming) The Side-effects of the Bologna Process on Institutional Settings: the Case of France. In A. Amaral, P. Maassen, C. Musselin and G. Neave (eds.), *Bologna, Universities and Bureaucrats*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
Neave, G. (1996) Homogenization, Integration and Convergence: the Cheshire Cats of Higher Education Analysis. In L. Meek, L. Goedegebuure, O. Kivinen and R. Rinne (eds.), *The Mockers and Mocked: Comparative Perspectives on Differentiation, Convergence and Diversity In Higher Education*. Oxford: Pergamon, pp. 26–41.
Neave, G. (1998) The Evaluative State Reconsidered. *European Journal of Education*, 33 (3, September), pp. 265–284.
Neave, G. (2002) Vale Tudo – ou como a adaptação das universidades à integração europeia encerra contradiçãoes afinal inspiradoras. *Boletim Universidade do Porto*, (35, Maío), pp. 9–18.
Neave, G. (2005) Times, Measures and the Man: the Future of British Higher Education treated historically and comparatively. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60 (2, April), pp. 115–128.
Neave, G. (2006a) Times, Measures and the Man: the Future of British Higher Education treated historically and comparatively. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60 (2, April), pp. 115–128.
Neave, G. (2006b) Social Dimension och Social Sammanhallning i Bologna processen: Eller, att Forlika Adam Smith med Thomas Hobbes. In K. Blückert and E. Österberg (eds.), *Gränslöst i Sverige och i Världen*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, pp. 382–403.
Neave, G. (2006c) *A Privatizaçao da Educaçao Superior e a Dinâmic do Estado Avaliador*. Conferência Magna do 8 Fòrum Nacional; Ensino Superior Particular Brasileiro, October 19–21 2006, World Trade Centre, Sao Paulo, Brazil. 23 pp.
Neave, G. (Forthcoming) The Bologna Process as Omega or Alpha. Or, On Interpreting History and Context as Inputs to Bologna, Prague, Berlin and Beyond. In A. Amaral, P. Maassen, C. Musselin and G. Neave (eds.), *Bologna, Universities and Bureaucrats*. Kluwer: Dordrecht.
Neave, G. and van Vught, F. (1994) *Prometeo Encadenado: Estado y Educación Superior en Europa*. Barcelona: Gedisa, pp. 377–399.
Pressman, J. L. and Wildavsky, A. B. (1984) *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are dashed in Oakland: or, Why it's Amazing that Federal Programs Work at all, this being A saga of the Economic Development Administration as Told by Two Sympathetic Observers who Seek to Build Morals on a Foundation of Ruined Hopes*, 3rd edn. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Purser, L. and Crosier, D. (2007) *Trends V: Key Messages*. 4th Convention of European Higher Education Institutions, March 2007, Lisbon (power point presentation).

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Redding, V. (2003) 'Address to the Berlin Meeting of Ministers of Higher Education, September 17–19th 2003' quoted in Tomusk, Voldemar (2004) 'Three Bolognas and a pizza pie: notes on the institutionalisation of the European Higher Education System'. *International Studies in the Sociology of Education*, 14 (1), pp. 75–96.

Reichert, S. and Tauch, C. (2003) *Trends 2003: Progress Towards the European Higher Education Area*, (summary). Bruxelles/Geneva: EUA.

Reichert, S. and Tauch, C. (2005) *Trends IV. European Universities implementing Bologna*. Bruxelles: European Universities' Association/ Socrates.

Schwartz-Hahn, S. and Westerheijden, D. (2004) *Accreditation and Evaluation in the European Higher Education Area*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Veiga, A., Rosa, M. J. and Amaral, A. (2006) The Internationalisation of Portuguese Higher Education: How are Higher Education Institutions . . . *Higher Education Management*, 18 (2), pp. 113–128.

de Wit, K. and Verhoeven, J. (2001) Higher Education Policy of the European Union: with or without the Member States. In J. Huisman, P. Maassen and G. Neave (eds.), *Higher Education and the Nation State: the international dimension of Higher Education*. Oxford: Elsevier Science, pp. 175–232.

Witte, J. (2006) *Change of Degrees and Degrees of Change: Comparing Adaptations of European Higher Education Systems in the Context of the Bologna Process*. Enschede: CHEPS.

© 2008 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.