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ECPR conference August 2011, Reykjavik

Bologna, Lisbon, the European Commission and the institutional conditions of Competition in European Higher Education*

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* This paper was written as part of the research project ‘The emergence of a European University Policy Space’ (Project leader: Robert Harmsen), funded by the University of Luxembourg

1 – Promoting the knowledge economy

A few centuries ago students travelled to different universities in different parts of Europe to maximise the benefits of their education. At that time university education was the privilege of only a small minority and the purpose of their education was less centred on economic aspects or ideas of competition. The modern state and its inevitable consequences was still absent.

From this state of society we moved on to the industrial age and from there to something called the service society. While we are still trying to come to terms with the implication of the service society, the (economic) profile of our societal cohabitation has already changed again – towards the knowledge society or, with a slightly different emphasis, towards the knowledge economy.

Especially as the term ‘knowledge *economy*’ implies, knowledge becomes a commodity. A commodity that is valuable for the well-being of a society or a modern state. According to Dierkes and Merckens (2002: 7-8) this has led to the result that only states and regions that invest in the knowledge foundation of their society have a chance to be amongst the winners in a race that turns knowledge into an economic advantage. Investment in education in this view becomes an investment in human capital. While education generally is affected by such a development, institutions of higher education are particularly exposed to the pressure of globalisation and competition (Ibid.: 8-9).

Whether one agrees with such an observation or whether one appreciates such a function of higher education is not the question here. It is clear, though, that this development contributed fundamentally to a change in the nature of higher education, in particular with regard to three aspects:

- Quantitative expansion of the sector
- Internationalisation of higher education
- Advancement of economic principles within higher education

A modern democratic society almost by definition requires an opening up of access to higher education (quantitative expansion) and the advancement of knowledge does not know physical borders as higher education and its major institutional manifestations in the form of universities¹ do have an inherent dimension that goes well beyond any such narrowly defined borders. They practically require the international dimension for their ‘well-being’. Some centuries ago this was expressed by the travelling students and nowadays it finds some of its most visible expression in the European Bologna process or, on a different level, in the international university rankings (*‘Times Higher Education World University Ranking’* or *‘Shanghai Ranking’* to name just two).

Rankings do not only represent internationality, they also reflect the increased economic competition. For that reason they also contribute to the advancement of economic principles within higher education as they are competitions that imply the requirement of the use of economic principles (e.g. management rules) to be able to master the challenge of rankings.

But the economic challenge does not stop here. The purpose of university education is now more associated with an economic dimension than ever before. This led Sjur Bergan of the Council of Europe, for example, to describe more recent public discussion about higher

¹ Naturally, there are other institutional expressions of higher education but an institutional differentiation is of less relevance for the following argument.

education in Europe in the following terms: “Even someone who tries to follow the public debate in this area could easily be left with the impression that the sole purpose of higher education is to help improve our economy” (Bergan, 2008, 117).

Currently the most noticeable arena for debates in European higher education is the Bologna process which came to life in 1999 and is nowadays considered by some to be an instrument for the advancement of the ‘economy agenda’ in higher education. The actual declaration of 1999 does not seem to justify such a view but the economic dimension appears to have become more prominent by the involvement of an actor that was not a founding member of Bologna – the European Commission.

The European Commission joined the Bologna process as a full member in 2001. In the previous year the European Council had launched the Lisbon strategy² for the EU to face the “new challenges” of a “quantum shift resulting from globalization and the challenges of a new knowledge driven economy” (European Council, 2000).

While Lisbon went well beyond higher education (and did at this early stage not even focus on it), it contributed fundamentally to the Commission’s reputation (as the driving force behind the strategy) as the main promoter of a competition driven economic agenda.

Yet, when the Commission joined Bologna it not only joined an intergovernmental process outside the structures of the EU. It also joined a process that dealt with an issue – higher education – that was quintessentially the prerogative of the individual member states. As a consequence, the institutional conditions for any competition agenda for higher education were also determined by the states and their institutional conditions. Despite those circumstances, the European Commission was able to assume a pivotal role in European higher education and contributed to the advancement of a competition agenda. This agenda led to competition becoming a buzzword and, for some, the scapegoat to focus on to express a general disagreement with developments in higher education. And for others it simply meant that the long existing reality of the outside world had entered higher education. Given such relevance of competition in European higher education, the question arises: What are the institutional conditions for what kind of competition in European higher education?

To approach an answer to this question the focus here will be on competition as part of the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy with a particular reference to the European Commission as arguably the most prominent, competition orientated actor on the European level within the described higher education dimension. The following argument will start by looking at the general development of European higher education followed by analysis of the role of the European Commission and by an analysis of the competition dimension in the official documents of the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy. This will be complemented by the results of interviews with representatives from various stakeholders in the Bologna process and higher education experts.

The resulting analysis will not try to evaluate the advantages or disadvantages of a competition dimension in higher education or whether competition in higher education is good or bad; it will rather point at the complexity of an issue that tends to be perceived in rather one-dimensional terms in public debates.

² Also referred to as Lisbon agenda or Lisbon process

2 – Competition in the context of Bologna and Lisbon

2.1 The development of European Higher Education

The Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy do not mark the beginning of a European dimension in higher education. In a way, the roots could be traced back to the travelling students of centuries ago. However, in the context of this argument the more important period is closely related to the development of the European integration process.

European Higher Education before 1999

General principles of vocational education became part of the Rome Treaty of 1957 (article 128) and subsequent decisions by the Council of the European Economic Community (EEC). Although the implications of the treaty provision were rather limited (cf. Balzer and Rusconi, 2007: 61-2) the treaty at least indicated that education had left its national borders. This was underlined when national ministers of education started to meet on an international level in 1959 within the organisational framework of the Council of Europe, followed by a meeting in 1967 organised by UNESCO. This development opened up new prospects for the European Commission which tried to stimulate a European debate on coordinating national higher education systems. As a result the first conference of the ministers of education of the EEC took place in 1971 (Ibid.: 60-1; Walter, 2007: 15).

There were some meetings to follow but they had no substantial political consequences for the coordination of higher education systems. This was also due to the non-binding character of the meetings and the unresolved question of whether coordination should take place within or outside the EEC. An intervention by the Danish government in 1978 based on the argument that education policy is not part of the treaties and that the EEC is merely an organisation for economic purposes, led to the suspension of those meetings until 1980 (Walter, 2007: 17-8).

To avoid the question of competence, the Commission continued to focus on voluntary cooperation, leading in 1987 to the ERASMUS student exchange program as a legally non-binding initiative that “depends solely on cooperation of academic institutions willing to participate” (Demmelhuber, 2003: 44). The Erasmus program proved to be quite successful and paved the way for further developments.

While the above described changes took place on the main political stage, the next milestone of European higher education was initiated by representatives of the higher education institutions themselves.

In 1988 around 400 rectors signed the Magna Charta Universitatum on “fundamental University Values and Rights” in Bologna. Not only due to the same location the Magna Charta Universitatum became a reference point for the Bologna declaration eleven years later. The Charta, though, did not serve as a reference point for a competition agenda. Quite the opposite, the term ‘competition’ was not even used once in the document. Instead the first fundamental principle laid down in the Magna Charta states:

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power

The shift towards a much greater economic importance of higher education did not go unnoticed with the rectors. Yet, they choose not to name the devil ‘competition’ that came with globalisation and a massively increased higher education sector – it looks rather that they tried to protect the universities from it.

Almost in contrast to the Magna Charta, the European Commission produced three years later a “Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community” in which the importance of higher education for the economic, social and cultural development of the Community is emphasised. As a result, the Commission demanded from the member states more convergence and common action for the higher education sector. Almost all reactions from the member states were negative and emphasised that higher education was their (cultural) prerogative and denied the Commission any competence for an area that was ‘protected’ by the principle of subsidiarity (Friedrich, 2005: 119; Hahn, 2004: 37-8).

Despite the rejecting attitude only one year later the Maastricht Treaty “recognized for the first time the EU’s responsibility to promote cooperation in education between European countries” (Mora and Felix, 2009: 195). However, the emphasis of the relevant treaty provisions (Article 126 and 127) is on “encouraging cooperation” and not on initiating a legally binding European higher education policy. Furthermore, both articles ban in their fourth paragraph the use of “harmonization of the laws of the Member States”. For Walter (2007: 24) this results in a double boundary to limit the aspiration of the Commission. Hence, the sovereignty of the member states was still respected and the treaty therefore did initially not stimulate a new dimension in European higher education.

The Commission tried in the following years to overcome the limitation by encouraging and leading the discussion through publishing documents related to the development of European higher education (Ibid.: 25). Despite such efforts, the next substantial step was actually initiated by the Council of Europe and UNESCO: in 1997 the Lisbon convention ‘on the recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region’ was introduced.³ Subsequently, the document became the most important legal instrument for the recognition of higher education degrees (Reichert and Tauch, 2003: 9) – and actually the only legally binding instrument of Bologna.

Only one year after the Lisbon convention, the Sorbonne declaration was signed on the 25th of May 1998 by the (higher) education ministers of the ‘core’ countries of the EU (France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany). The other EU member states (eleven at that time) were not particularly pleased by this isolated move (Friedrich, 2005: 115) but the development one year later (the signing of the Bologna declaration) leaves the impression that the feeling of being left outside did not last too long.

It is worth mentioning here that the Sorbonne declaration refers directly to the Lisbon convention and demands the establishment of some common structures (e.g. to promote mobility to study abroad) and the creation of a ‘European area of higher education’ while at the same time underlining the need to respect “our diversities” and pointing out that “our governments ... continue to have a significant role to play to these ends”. This emphasis of the responsibility of the individual states probably also helped to calm down the other EU members – and could be portrayed as a visible expression for the exclusion of the European Commission.

³ It should be noted, though, that the recognition of degrees was also an issue in the Maastricht Treaty.

In any case, the Europeanisation process of higher education continued to accelerate. The Bologna declaration of 1999 thereby only marked a more visible stage of something that had already started before. Yet, the resulting Bologna process further accelerated the Europeanisation process and provided the European Commission – after a delayed start – with the opportunity to take on a more prominent role.

The Bologna process

When the Bologna declaration was signed in 1999 by twenty-nine countries (including all 15 EU member states), the document made not only explicit reference to the Magna Charta Universitatum but also, more importantly, to the Sorbonne declaration by also focussing on the same content.⁴ In the declaration this led to a specification of six areas of cooperation, essentially tied to the comparability of degree structures and mobility:

- Adoption of easily readable and comparable degrees
- Adoption of a degree system based on two main cycles
- Establishment of a credit points system
- Promotion of mobility of students, researchers and administrative personnel
- Promotion of cooperation in Quality assurance on a European level
- Promotion of the European dimension in higher education

In the following years the process was governed by the regular holding of ministerial follow-up conferences usually every two years leading to both, a substantive expansion and a geographical expansion.

Without going into the details of the additional areas of cooperation, it is worth pointing out one aspect: In Berlin (2003) it was for the first time sought to link the teaching and research dimension of higher education into a more comprehensively defined whole:

Conscious of the need to promote closer links between the EHEA [European Higher Education Area] and the ERA [European Research Area] in a Europe of Knowledge, and of the importance of research as an integral part of higher education across Europe, Ministers consider it necessary to go beyond the present focus on two main cycles of higher education to include the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. (Berlin Communiqué)

Despite the reference to the ERA, the central focus of Bologna remains on learning and teaching and less on research. Even the inclusion of doctoral education does not represent an exception to this logic. By referring to it as the third cycle in the degree structure it appears to be closer to the Anglo-American model of doctoral education than for example to the German understanding of the status of a doctoral student. As a consequence the meaning of the third cycle as a bridge to research appears to be less relevant (Keller, 2005: 75).

In terms of its geographical expansion Bologna now represents a process whose membership extends well beyond the EU and geographical Europe. While a marginal majority of Bologna is still made up of EU member states the balance between EU and non-EU has been given more formal recognition in Leuven in 2009. There it was agreed that the chair of the process would be shared by the country holding the EU presidency and a non-EU member state. At this stage the European Commission had already been a member for eight years and until now remains the only non-state full member of the Bologna process.

⁴ A fact that especially in France sometimes leads to the reference ‘Sorbonne-Bologna process’ (e.g.: http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/France_Report_franz.pdf).

It is also important to note another aspect of Bologna: The declaration and communiqués are only the end result of lengthy meetings and discussions which start more or less immediately after one ministerial meeting is over. The necessary ‘substantial work’ between the ministerial conferences is done by the ‘Bologna Follow-Up Group’ (BFUG) and through the work of a more restricted executive board.

While the Bologna Declaration led to a more definite shape of a previously loose arrangement of intergovernmental coordination, the current state of the process is still only lightly institutionalised. For example, there seems to be an inherent resistance to establish any form of permanent secretariat as this function is normally performed by the host country of the next ministerial conference.

The reason for this lack of institutionalisation can also be found in the fact that the Bologna process is basically legally non-binding (with the exception of the Lisbon convention; see above). One scholar, Sacha Garben (2010) has therefore criticised the process from the point of view of an ‘EU law orthodoxy’ as having pre-empted action which could have been adopted within the narrower EU context. Or in the words of an official from the Commission, summarising Garben’s thesis in a more provocative manner: Bologna should have been a directive!⁵ Yet, the conflict potential of Bologna, as witnessed over the last few years in the form of students protesting against what they perceived as result of the Bologna process, would probably not have benefited from such an EU approach. At the end, though, this remains speculation as Bologna is not a process of the EU. This, however, applies to the Lisbon strategy.

The Lisbon strategy

In March 2000 the European Council came together for a special meeting in Lisbon to agree, amongst other things, on “a new strategic goal for the Union in order to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy”. Ultimately, the ambition was “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council, 2000).

This quote underlines that Lisbon is more than just higher education or as one former European Commission official puts it: “Lisbon is everything; Lisbon is an abbreviation for the whole economic and social political development of the EU”.⁶ And while the dimension of knowledge production was central to the document, the limited focus on higher education mainly revolved around the research dimension. As a consequence Bologna was not directly mentioned in the Lisbon document despite some reference to issues that are also central to Bologna (e.g. mobility of students and researchers).

That Bologna was somehow ignored in 2000 by the Council might come as a surprise retrospectively. Bologna was perhaps still too new to have shown its full potential. And maybe it was too small: Lisbon as the “large matrix” almost dwarfed the Bologna aspirations which were therefore overlooked. These aspects together with the lack of legal competence of the EU in the Bologna process might explain the absence of a direct reference to Bologna in Lisbon. However, as will be shown further down, Bologna was an issue for the EU already at the beginning of Lisbon. After the European Commission had joined the Bologna process in 2001, the relevance of Bologna for the Lisbon strategy became more apparent.

⁵ Interview, 03.02.2011 (2.)

⁶ Interview, 28.01.2011

In 2003 the Commission produced a more focused paper on “The role of the universities in the Europe of Knowledge”. The paper not only wanted to “start a debate” (European Commission, 2003: 1) it also offered the commitment of the Commission “to support and help to foster the Bologna process” (Ibid.: 11) – as part of the Lisbon strategy.

However, while the Bologna process continued to spread its influence the Lisbon strategy experienced a setback and required a restart in 2005 which was marked by a communication from the Commission: ‘Working together for growth and jobs. A new start for the Lisbon strategy’.

Even though the Commission had in the meantime acquired a more prominent role in the Bologna process there was again no particular reference in the document to Bologna (except for a reference to the EHEA). Only two months later, though, the Commission (2005a) corrected the impression of a limited importance of Bologna for Lisbon by producing a communication devoted exclusively to universities (‘Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make full contribution to the Lisbon strategy’) followed about a year later by so far the latest statement dealing with the same topic (‘Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: education, research and innovation’). There is no question left in the 2006 Commission statement about the relevance of Bologna for Lisbon (Ibid.: 5): “**A major effort should be made to achieve the core Bologna reforms by 2010** in all EU countries” (bold print in original). And there is also no question about the purpose of the modernisation agenda as universities are considered to be the “foundations of European competitiveness” (Ibid.: 2)

Regardless of the renewed efforts, Lisbon (as a whole) was still struggling to achieve the objectives of its strategy. Ultimately, this led to the second restart of the project now under the new name of ‘Europe 2020’. The new approach of the European Commission (2010) was adopted by the European Council at its meeting in Brussels in June 2010.

It is too early to comment on the new strategy especially as again a more detailed communication by the commission on the relevance of the universities has not been published yet.⁷ It is a continuation of the Lisbon strategy but at the same time it displays some conceptual changes (Hummer, 2010). The targets, however, remained almost unchanged (European Commission, 2010):

- 75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed
- 3% of the EU’s GDP should be invested in research and development
- ‘20/20/20’ climate/energy targets should be met
- Share of early school leavers should be under 10%
- 40% of the young generation should have a tertiary degree
- 20 million fewer people should be at risk of poverty

Although Lisbon was not particularly successful and Europe 2020 has still to prove whether it can improve the record of the initiative, Lisbon had an effect on European Higher Education agenda. Eric Beerkens (2008: 417) argues that as a result of an identified “crisis of European universities” and due to the “sclerotic nature of the European economy” the ground was prepared “for a closer alignment [of the Bologna process] with the competitiveness based Lisbon Agenda” which led, due to the dominance of the economic dimension, to “Lisbonisation of Bologna” within “one policy framework”. The implication of such an analysis is clear: “... the role of the Commission in shaping the reforms throughout Europe

⁷ The document is expected for publication in autumn 2011.

has increased” (Ibid.). Another consequence of this situation is that a study of competition in European higher education cannot ignore the role of the European Commission.

2.2 The role of the European Commission

The role of the European Commission in European Higher Education is characterised by a lengthy period before 1999 where it tried to stimulate the development of a policy area on a European level that was outside its treaty based competence. This was met by opposition of the member states on various occasions (see above). Even the successful Erasmus program was initially affected by this atmosphere.⁸

When the development towards a European higher education started to accelerate, the Commission was not directly involved – neither in Sorbonne nor in Bologna – despite the provisions in the Maastricht treaty that would have implied a more prominent role. The reasons for this are manifold but at the centre was the status of higher education as still being within the legal competence of the member states.⁹ In Sorbonne, the countries involved did not want the Commission to be part of the initiative – it should not look like Brussels.¹⁰ The UK, France and Germany in a way thereby continued the critical opposition they had shown over 10 years earlier (see footnote 8). In 1999 the situation for the Commission was basically the same even if it did not experience the same level of exclusion but there were still tensions visible affecting the atmosphere of the Bologna conference (Toens, 2007: 48-9; Balzer and Rusconi, 2007: 66).

The commission did not particularly like being excluded and might even have felt alienated but this state did not last too long.¹¹ Most of the interviewees pointed out that the goals of the Bologna process were almost all taken from EU initiatives. While the question remains of whether those goals also came from other sources of inspiration, the copying of EU goals into Bologna led one member of the Commission to note that this was a “great compliment” for the European Commission.¹²

A former member of the Commission portrays the general situation surrounding Sorbonne and Bologna from a different angle by stating that “to the European Commission as a whole, Sorbonne and Bologna were irrelevant. Education was not a sector of any importance in the Commission at that stage. It did not perceive it as an arena where it is active. Erasmus and others were running but they were not seen as politically important.”¹³ Another interviewee points in a similar direction by emphasising that there was a tendency at the beginning of Bologna not to mention the process in speeches and documents and that Bologna, due to the

⁸ The European Commission (2006a) in its comprehensive review of ‘The history of European cooperation in education and training’ points itself at the difficult adoption of the program that required “(e)ighteen months of bitter negotiations” mainly based on a dispute over the budget and the legal basis. Thereby, the UK, France and Germany were at the forefront of the opposition to the program (Ibid.: 117).

⁹ Elsewhere (Balzer and Rusconi, 2007: 66) this argument has been expressed by a reference to the principle of subsidiarity.

¹⁰ Interviews, 28.01. and 03.02.2011 (2.); for a more detailed account of the background of the Sorbonne declaration, see: Toens, 2007

¹¹ Although one of our Commission interviewees insisted that the Commission did not feel excluded at all

¹² Interview, 03.02.2011 (2.)

¹³ Interview, 12.05.2011 (1.)

financial implications, sometimes was even seen as a millstone around the Commission's neck. It was not the process of the EU.¹⁴

These views not only point at a different perception of European higher education within the European Commission at the time of the Bologna declaration but it also highlights another aspect: while the Commission is a rather large organisation, there are basically only two Directorates-General (DG) that deal with Bologna and the higher education dimension of Lisbon /Europe 2020 – DG Education and Culture (EAC) and DG Research and Innovation (RAI). Within these DGs there are actually only a few people that are directly involved in the Bologna process – almost exclusively from DG EAC.¹⁵ The consequence is that it leaves individuals with a rather great influence and over time that can lead to people leaving behind their individual marks that then are portrayed as marks of the Commission. This is not to imply that officials of the Commission can act totally independent of a general Commission policy but in combination with a less prominent topic (as quoted above) this could leave the individuals with more impact than in a field of high priority.

In the years after 2001 the Commission started to pay more attention to the Bologna process. While the Lisbon strategy was not a clear signal in that direction it marked the beginning of the realisation that without innovation and without a better qualification for the workforce, Europe would not be able to sustain or attain its desired level of economic prosperity.¹⁶ And while the full membership of the Commission in the Bologna process in Prague 2001 could also be perceived as a result of the engagement of individual officials from DG EAC, the 2003 publication on 'The role of the universities in the Europe of Knowledge' as part of the Lisbon strategy clearly indicated that higher education had reached the level of an official priority of the Commission. Bologna was finally perceived as a useful vehicle for its own approach to reforms.¹⁷ Together with its own Lisbon strategy both initiatives functioned as the basis for the expansion of the influence of the Commission in European higher education.

That Bologna served as a source for the expanding role of the Commission might appear as something like an anomaly. After all, Bologna was and still is an intergovernmental process even if it allowed and encouraged the participation of other European stakeholders in the process. However, as one interviewee put it, "a process stalls if no broker gets in".¹⁸ This view that is based on what Barbara Haskell (2009: 274) characterises as the "implicit 'demand' for leadership" as a result of an intergovernmental process "that ... quickly proved ineffective" (Ibid.) provided the ground for the accession of the Commission to Bologna. In other words: the broker to solve the situation and to institutionalise the process was the Commission. It had the financial and organisational resources to take on that position.

The ground for an expanding role of the Commission was also prepared by the introduction of a new policy instrument as part of the Lisbon strategy: the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The OMC was to "act as the means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals" (European Council, 2000) in particularly sensitive policy areas. As such OMC appeared to be particularly suited as an instrument for coordinating European higher education. In the Lisbon strategy it proved initially less

¹⁴ Interview, 28.01.2011

¹⁵ As one interviewee puts it, the 'cook' of the Commission for Bologna is a single department within DG EAC (interview, 28.01.2011).

¹⁶ Interview, 12.05.2011 (1.)

¹⁷ Interview, 28.01.2011

¹⁸ Interview, 03.02.2011 (1.)

successful (Keeling, 2006: 205-06) and in the Bologna process it displayed itself as a tool with a mixed record: successful but with a lack of visibility (Drachenberg, 2011: 144-5).

While a discussion of the impact of OMC would go too far here, the interviews indicate that the OMC produced only a mixed record. For example, the country reports as a sort of offspring of the Lisbon OMC seemed to have its limits in its ‘name and shame’ approach. The resulting traffic lights showed a green where it was actually light green and yellow where it was actually red (see also: Ravinet, 2008: 363-4). None of the member states wants to appear in a bad light and there are limits to how much one can criticise the self-description of the members in a non-compulsory process.

In any case, the Commission managed to gain a leading position in European higher education which has been pointed out in various articles from different perspectives (see for example: Haskel, 2009 and Keeling, 2006). It managed to underline the connection between employment policy and (higher) education policy and thereby “has confirmed higher education as a key sphere of operation for the EU” (Keeling, 2006: 215). And it emphasised a need for the modernisation of universities to face competition.

The following section will therefore move to an analysis of the competition dimension in the Bologna and Lisbon documents, and as will be shown, its use is less clear than the use in the public discussions seems to imply.

2.3 Bologna, Lisbon/Europe 2020 and Competition – the documents

In many ways, the Sorbonne declaration has to be seen as part of the Bologna process, not least because most of the issues of Sorbonne could be found again in the Bologna declaration.

Competition, however, was not an issue in Sorbonne – at least the term was not mentioned in the declaration.

This reminds one of the Magna Charta. Even the circumstances for the signing of the two documents were similar: the anniversary of the University of Bologna (Magna Charta) in one case and the anniversary of the University Paris-Sorbonne in the other case. While the actors on both occasions were different (political representatives vs. heads of universities) the almost protectionist language while referring to the economic dimension was strikingly similar. Sorbonne states already in the first paragraph:

The European process has very recently moved some extremely important steps ahead. Relevant as they are, they should not make one forget that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well.

Nevertheless, the national ministers who signed the Sorbonne declaration were certainly also aware of the economic dimension of higher education but the balance of the document was characterised by a less explicit reference to the economic role of universities.

This balance shifted slightly the following year in the Bologna declaration, and competition became an issue. Competition – or more precisely competitiveness – is mentioned twice in the document. Both times it refers to increasing the international competitiveness of the European Higher Education system.

The direct reference to competition does not fundamentally increase in the following Communiqués with the London communiqué of 2007 marking the highpoint with five references.

Generally, it is possible to identify four levels of competition: the individual (although only mentioned once), the institutional, the European higher education area (EHEA) and the general European level. It might not come as a surprise that the focus on the competitiveness of the EHEA does dominate as a goal in the Bologna documents. For the argument, though, it is worth noting that the focus is less on the individuals or the institutions even if the operationalization of how to reach an increased competitiveness of the EHEA also implies an increase of competition on those levels.

From that perspective to summarise that the “Bologna Declaration in 1999 set out a vision for 2010 of an internationally competitive and attractive European Higher Education Area” (Budapest Vienna declaration of 2010) appears to reflect more the discussions and issues surrounding Bologna than the actual content of the documents.

One of the issues surrounding Bologna was and is the Lisbon strategy and its successor Europe 2020. When looking at the relevant documents here the picture looks different than in Bologna. Lisbon/Europe 2020 is explicitly focused on improving competitiveness and it is a process by the Commission for the EU. It therefore does not surprise that the ‘c’ word is not avoided in the general documents. However, while the original document of 2000 (European council, 2000) uses the word competition or variations of it only 12 times, this expanded considerably to around 40 times in each of the documents of the restart of the Lisbon strategy (European Commission, 2005) and the launch of Europe 2020 (European Commission, 2010).

As has been mentioned above, the reference to Bologna in those documents is limited or non-existent. The same applies to higher education and universities generally. As a consequence, competition and higher education are not often mentioned together (in the Europe 2020 document not even once). There are, of course the more specific documents of Lisbon dealing exclusively with universities.

The first one (European commission, 2003) not only made numerous direct references to the Bologna process, it also ‘exposed’ the university sector to various forms of competition (24 times in the text) based on the analysis that “the European universities are not at present globally competitive with those of our major partners” (Ibid.: 2). As a consequence, the focus is predominately on the institutional level (and then on the European level).

Three more aspects are interesting when analysing the competition dimension of the document.

1. The existence of different levels of competition is for the first time clearly articulated – at least for some levels: The momentum of internationalisation is considerably speeded up by the new information and communication technologies. The result is increased competition. Competition between universities and between countries, but also between universities and other institutions, particularly public research laboratories [...], or private teaching institutions, often specialised and sometimes run on a profit-making basis.” (Ibid.: 6)
2. The relationship between universities and the industry is plainly laid out by arguing that “(f)rom a competitiveness perspective it is vital that knowledge flows from universities into business and society” (Ibid. 7).
3. The Commission bluntly defines its role in the Bologna process: “(T)he Commission supports and helps to foster the Bologna process which is designed to create between now and 2010 a European higher education area which is consistent, compatible and competitive, through reforms which converge around certain defining objectives.” (Ibid.: 11)

After the restart of Lisbon, the first special communication by the Commission (2005a) on the universities identified a need for modernisation of the higher education institutions. To deal with this, the following Commission paper (2006) devoted itself entirely to that topic. The communication underlined once more that universities are seen as the foundation of European competitiveness but that they are “not currently in a position to achieve their potential in a number of important ways. As a result, they are behind in the increased international competition for talented academics and students, and miss out on fast changing research agendas and on generating the critical mass, excellence and flexibility necessary to succeed” (Ibid.: 4).

A lack of funding is identified as a reason behind that perception. An increase in funding is therefore necessary but not without an element of competition: “Competitive funding should be based on institutional evaluation systems and on diversified performance indicators with clearly defined targets and indicators supported by international benchmarking for both inputs and economic and societal outputs.” (Ibid.: 8)

The nature of competition implies that not everyone will get more funding. Some will benefit more than others also because of their relationship with the private sector: “Increased competition, combined with more mobility and further concentration of resources, should enable universities and their partners in industry to offer a more open and challenging working environment to the most talented students and researchers, thereby making them more attractive to Europeans and non-Europeans alike. Universities need to be in a position to attract the best academics and researchers, to recruit them by flexible, open and transparent procedures, to guarantee principal investigators/team-leaders full research independence and to provide staff with attractive career prospects.” (Ibid.: 9)

The emphasis on research to achieve the goal is underlined by two initiatives of the Commission to strengthen competition (for excellence): the proposal for a European Institute of Technology and the European Research Council (Ibid. 9).

Because of the limited (or actually no) competence of the EU and the Commission in terms of general higher education, it does not come as a surprise that the focus seems to shift more to research (which is not the main focus here).

Despite the communication efforts by the Commission, the Lisbon strategy – as the overarching agenda for improving the competitiveness of the higher education sector – failed to take hold and finally led to Europe 2020.

The focus on the term ‘competition’ and its variations here does of course not imply that the use of the term alone determines the ‘amount’ of competition implied by a document. It is also not enough to grasp the ‘spirit’ of a policy initiative that goes beyond the content of a few documents. It does, however, point at another fact: the meaning of competition. And the analysis above showed that there is not one competition, there are various forms and levels of competition involved.

2.4 The institutional conditions for competition

The short analysis of the ‘competition-dimension’ for higher education in the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy shows a lack of a single concept or even a definition of ‘competition’. As a result, both initiatives deal with and demand various levels of competition (the individual, the institutional, the sectoral (research), the national and the international or

transnational level) – often without a clear structure of how to reach the different goals.¹⁹ Competition in these expressions seems to apply to everything and everyone in higher education without a continuous systematic differentiation of the levels of competition and the resulting implications. The reasons of that situation are manifold and some of the aspects will be looked at in the following paragraphs.

The lack of a concept or a definition of competition has also been a criticism towards the general EU concept of competition. The economist Helge Peukert (2010: 89) argues that this could be the result of an explicit pragmatism of the Commission and that it could also be due to various specific national competition policies and their interaction with other (national) policy areas.

In the concrete case of European higher education the influence of interacting rationales behind the development was also a contributing element: in the circumstance of Sorbonne and Bologna, competitiveness was not the main driving force. There was a whole set of factors influencing senior politicians in different countries.²⁰ And there was the fundamental question of the basic principle behind the EHEA – competition or cooperation to face globalization? For Guy Neave (2009: 31) this poses a dilemma that is still present.²¹

In the case of the governmental stakeholders in European higher education in the pre-Bologna period the historian Thomas Walter (2007) actually identifies a dominance of the cooperation model amongst them (Ibid.: 10-11).²² The following Bologna process neither continued to develop exclusively along this path nor did it lead to a discontinuity. Walter rather offers an explanation that tries to understand Bologna as a double attempt of realignment where previous rivalries and actors do not become obsolete but where the pattern of cooperation changes and where some of the main political stakeholders (those predominately engaged in a horizontal sharing of power) work together instead of engaging in a competition. Though, the vertical division of power (i.e. between the Commission and the member states) remained according to Walter largely unaffected (Ibid.: 12, 32-3).

It is not possible here to look at all the main stakeholders in the EHEA²³ but the vertical division of power emphasizes another important fact for understanding the conditions for competition: the multilevel governance structure of the Bologna process. It consists basically of three levels: the European, the national and the institutional level.²⁴

The European level has been looked at above and the institutional level is of less relevance here. This leaves the national level which actually can represent two levels in the case of a federal state.

The importance of the national level has already been pointed out above (conflicting national policies) and the resulting institutional conditions are of particular importance in an area where the legal competence, as has been mentioned, rests almost exclusively with the member states. Depending on the organizational political structure of a state, the main legal

¹⁹ Europe 2020 tries to change that with its more focused ‘flagship initiatives’.

²⁰ Interview, 03.05.2011

²¹ In economics this apparent contradiction has been used to describe a hybrid form of ‘coopetition’ where cooperative and competitive interaction can lead to a balanced situation. Burr and Hartmann (2010) apply this concept to the European research area thereby implying a compatibility of both approaches.

²² Walter looks especially at the following stakeholders: Council of Europe, UNESCO, OECD and EU.

²³ In case of the Bologna process this would at least also include: EUA (European University Association), ESU (European Students’ Union) and EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education).

²⁴ For a detailed analysis of a multi-level governance approach to Bologna, see: Witte (2006: 24-31).

competence for general higher education is therefore located at the national level or at the subnational level (in case of a federal state like Germany). Other general institutional conditions include the constitutional and legal environment, the influence of non-governmental actors, the party system and the societal and cultural conditions.²⁵

Also, as a consequence of those conditions funding systems and the level of funding for higher education vary considerably in each state. Furthermore, institutions of higher education differ not only from state to state but also within a state (for example in relation to grade of autonomy, subjects offered, internal governance, balance between Learning & Teaching and Research and Development, etc.).

Based on this argument of the importance of national institutional conditions it is difficult to argue that competition is predominately a concept determined by the European Commission – especially within the context of Bologna. After all, Sorbonne and Bologna took place because of an identified need by national governments for reform of their higher education systems.²⁶ Even after the establishment of the Bologna process, it is still the national governments that determine how far they will go. Ravinet (2008: 365), for example, identifies a “growing obligation associated with the Bologna Process” and the member states are willing to accept them – “as long as they benefit from them”. Thomas Walter (2007: 32) underlines this by stating: „Die Mitgliedstaaten der EU machen mit dem Bologna-Prozess Hochschulpolitik auch unter Einbeziehung der Europäischen Kommission.“²⁷

However, European higher education policy and the role of the actors involved cannot be fully understood without reference to the Lisbon strategy and from this perspective the picture looks slightly different.

Lisbon is an initiative by the Commission that has a much broader agenda and although it was so far not particularly successful as a whole it is the main expression of the competitiveness agenda of the EU. When it comes to this aspect a higher education official from outside the Commission claims that “the reforms that have taken place at national system level ... have come through the competitiveness agenda and the need to do national reporting which has been imposed through the Lisbon agenda.”²⁸

Such policy analysis also contributes to other interviewees pointing at the shared objectives of both processes thereby paying less attention to the apparent differences. For example, one senior official of the Commission views Lisbon and Bologna as sharing a mutual basis which is like “playing chess on different boards at the same time”.²⁹ For another Commission member it does not matter whether the ‘envelope’ is called Bologna or Lisbon. It is the content that matters and some aspects, like the PhD, fit into both envelopes. The officials underline the massive overlaps between Bologna and Lisbon by pointing at the role of the EU in Bologna in general (and not just that of the Commission): the presidency of the Bologna process is the EU presidency, the EU troika is in the Bologna board.³⁰

²⁵ Sjur Bergan (2008: 124-5) quotes a Chilean sociologist that illustrates the importance of societal and cultural conditions: „What kind of education do we need? – What kind of society do we want?”

²⁶ For a detailed account of the background of the Sorbonne declaration as a vehicle for national reforms, see: Toens, 2007.

²⁷ “The member states of the EU use the Bologna process to make higher education policy while also including the European Commission” (own translation).

²⁸ Interview, 03.05.2011

²⁹ Interview, 03.02.2011 (1.)

³⁰ Interview, 03.02.2011 (2.)

These views get taken even further by one former member of the Commission that perceives Lisbon as the big matrix where Bologna fits in.³¹ Another higher education expert that previously worked for the Commission underlines this view by characterising Bologna as an agenda ‘merely’ for structural change and Lisbon in contrast as a policy agenda.³² Such evaluations appear to leave little doubt about the applicability of the ‘Lisbonisation of Bologna’ analysis.

The institutional conditions for competition as part of the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy leave a diverse picture that requires a differentiation when it comes to the central question (What are the institutional conditions of for what kind of competition in European higher education?) of this argument.

3 – Conclusion

The Bologna process has been described “as the most powerful force for change in higher education public policy in Europe of the last 50 years” (Ravinet, 2008- 354) and competition has been characterized as being “amongst the most powerful technical and political rationales behind contemporary reform in Europe’s systems of higher education” (Neave, 2009: 28). The European Commission is a driving force behind Bologna and almost a natural expert for competition policy (not only due to its competitive modernization agenda for universities as part of the Lisbon/Europe 2020 strategy) this appears to leave little doubt about the influence of the Commission’s competition agenda. For Eric Beerens (2008: 417) “(t)he economic competitiveness ideal of Lisbon has taken the limelight over the educational and cultural ideals of the Bologna process”. The argument could stop here but it would not represent the full picture.

Competition is multi-dimensional and the various resulting expressions vary in nature. This becomes for example obvious in the case of Learning and Teaching versus Research and Development. They represent two different structural elements of university education even if one supports the ideal of the Humboldtian university where both elements are two sides of the same coin. In terms of competition, though, they reflect different (institutional) conditions and require different approaches. Thereby, research is less problematic for the European Commission as its education aspect is limited and therefore does not as much intrude into the legal competence of member states. Consequently, Lisbon (in its higher education dimension) is more research orientated than Bologna – and more open to a competition based economic approach.

In its wider expression, higher education (of which research forms only a part) fulfills multiple functions, has diverse origins and represents different institutional missions. It requires a balanced approach that takes into consideration competition but also diversity and the cultural dimension of higher education. The value of a cultural aspect was expressed over twenty years ago – maybe a bit over optimistically – by the Magna Charta Universitatum:

A university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition; its constant care is to attain universal knowledge; to fulfil its vocation it transcends geographical and political frontiers, and affirms the vital need for different cultures to know and influence each other.

³¹ Interview, 28.01.2011

³² Interview, 12.05.2011 (2.)

Such a view appears to leave little room for a role of the European Commission. It is not their area of competence. Yet, to conclude that it is also beyond the understanding of the Commission ignores two facts. First, the European Commission is not a homogenous actor. Beyond the influence of individuals this is also reflected by different DGs with different emphasises contributing to the Lisbon strategy leading to documents that do not reflect diverse positions but rather an agreed position. Second, the European integration project is mainly based on economic issues (even if the underlying idea goes well beyond this aspect). Hence, the emphasis of the work of the European Commission is naturally on the same dimension – the economic state of the EU. An engagement within higher education beyond this aspect (e.g. in the direction of a focus on cultural elements) would almost certainly lead to more and stronger resistance from various stakeholders than can be observed now in case of the competition agenda. Therefore, in a way the Commission does what it is told to do.

The guardian of the cultural dimension of universities is the state or a sub-state level. While this seems to be obvious the argument here would also emphasize the responsibility of the states for the exposure of higher education institutions to a competition agenda. With a few exceptions, aspects of competition are ultimately still determined by the member states of Bologna or the EU (in case of the Lisbon/Europe 2020 strategy). Those states have voluntarily used an intergovernmental process (Bologna) to stimulate national reforms and they used the Lisbon ‘script’ “to meet prevailing national interests” (Capano and Piattoni, 2011: 601). They might have done this due to peer pressure, due to general globalization pressure or due to a long necessary overhaul of their higher education systems but they also remained themselves largely in charge of the processes. Or to put it differently, the input comes from outside but the actual reforms take place in the states. That is one of the main reasons why the implementation of the goals of the Bologna process and the effect of the Lisbon strategy varies from country to country (see for example: Witte, 2006 (for Bologna) and Capano and Piattoni, 2011 (for Lisbon)).

The world of higher education has changed. The romantic image of a university education that takes as long as it takes and that raises no question about employability does not fit anymore. This might be unfortunate but it was at the end the privilege of only a few. Competition, however, was always around us. The effects of globalization have further highlighted this and brought it to areas where we were not so much used to it. Maybe the European Commission was only the messenger (and not the initiator) of the implications for higher education in the modern world. And maybe the message of the Commission had such an effect because a powerful and effective political alternative to the competition agenda was absent. At the end, the role of the competition agenda of the Commission in European higher education seems to be bigger than the institutional conditions would imply – but it still has its limits.

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