

Competition – an adequate basis for a European Higher Education Area (EHEA)?

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1 Introduction: the pressure of globalisation

The intergovernmental Bologna process (short: Bologna) and its aim of creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA)¹ might give the impression that higher education before Bologna was predominately a national issue. That can be misleading by underestimating the international dimension in higher education.

A few centuries ago students travelled to different universities in different parts of Europe to maximise the benefits of their education resulting already in the 17th century in a student mobility that was higher than the current rate (Teichler, 2004: 8-9). Admittedly, university education at that time was the privilege of only a small minority and the purpose of their education was arguably less centred on economic aspects. The following decline of the student mobility was also connected to the appearance of the nation state in the 19th century (Ibid.) which not only had consequences for travelling students but for the universities themselves. Both – the state and the university – developed a closer relationship resulting during the time of the industrial society in a condition where the two institutions “were reflected in one another” (de Vijlder, 2001: 159). As the spirit of modernisation was beginning to influence the environment of the nation state, its limits became obvious. Nowadays, the nation-states are influenced by developments like the “scaling up of economic and social activities far beyond [their] realm” and by “an almost unstoppable process” of “the liberalisation of trade and the establishment of new ways of competition regulation” (Ibid.: 159-60). The effects of globalisation creates a pressure for higher education too, as it “is often associated with competition and market-steering, trans-national education, and ... with commercial knowledge-transfer” (Teichler, 2004: 7). Ulrich Teichler, an expert on aspects of higher education, criticises a consequence of this development by revealing his surprise about “how much the debate on global phenomena in higher education suddenly focuses on marketisation, competition and management in higher education” (Ibid.: 23). In a similar vein, Council of Europe higher education specialist Sjur Bergan comments on more recent public discussions in Europe about higher education by stating that 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 to improve our economy” (Bergan, 2008: 117).

Currently the most noticeable arena for debates in European higher education is the aforementioned Bologna process which officially started its existence in 1999. It is sometimes considered to be an instrument for the advancement of the marketisation of higher education because of its perception as being a reaction of its members and other stakeholders to the globalisation pressure (Teichler, 2004: 19). As such the EHEA became a focal point of criticism as it was accused of providing the ground for the intrusion of neo-liberal thinking into the field of higher education and its related association with the concept of “human capital, as an engine for economic growth, as a private rather than public good, and as a new services sector within the economy” (Robertson, 2009: 70). Citing various initiatives at the European level, Robertson identifies 2003 as a tipping point in this movement. It is arguably no coincidence that in the same year the first global ranking (the Shanghai Ranking) was published, followed a year later by its British counterpart, the Times Higher Education Ranking. Although there had been institutional comparisons before, they basically took place on a national level. As the Australian higher education expert Simon Marginson (2010: 29) points out, before 2003 “[n]o one was talking about global classifications of institutions or cross-country comparisons of learning. Institutions were not globally referenced.”

¹ The EHEA was officially launched in 2010.

At first sight, rankings might represent internationality but what they reflect most is the aspect of competition. They contribute to the advancement of economic principles within higher education as they have implications for the governance of universities contributing to the spread of the neo-liberal new public management (NPM) model. Although NPM is not the focus here the critical evaluation of it by Marginson (2010a: 2) as an instrument that aims at “remaking educational institutions as business firms producing economic products within an open competitive market” further highlights the pervasive character of competition in higher education. Under these conditions the question naturally arises of how much the logic of competition can actually be identified in the construction of the EHEA – and where are the limits of the principle of competition? After all, the EHEA is an integration project that is not only inspired but also influenced by the wider European integration process. The combination of integration and competition therefore potentially causes a problem which, as will be shown, is visible in the documents.

Against this backdrop, the paper will approach the answers to the question of the logics and limits of competition in the EHEA by analysing the competition dimensions in the main ministerial documents of the Bologna process. This implies that the focus is on the principle of competition on the European level and less on its actual manifestation on the state level. The following analysis will start by looking at the most prominent stakeholders of the EHEA on the European level followed by the evaluation of the competition dimension not only in the Bologna documents but also in selected documents of the Lisbon/Europe 2020 strategy.² The resulting argument will highlight the different dimensions of competition and the diversity of the purposes of higher education within the EHEA.

2 The main stakeholders of the EHEA

Before evaluating the competition aspects in the EHEA it is necessary to have brief look at the stakeholders involved at the European level in the Bologna process as they determine the dimension of competition in the documents.

The central actors in the Bologna process are the national governments as it is still basically an intergovernmental process. The governments and their representatives, though, do not act as a homogenous group. They have different interests in the process and show different levels of engagement in the follow-up work to the ministerial conferences. Some are drivers of the process, others are merely there because it is nice to be a member of the club and – due to its non-binding character – it does not do any harm. Hence, especially at the initial stage of Bologna when the full potential had not yet become visible, the motivation behind the signatory countries was according to Pauline Ravinet (2008: 355-6) based on the attitude that they “would not have agreed to coordinate their policies in view of common objectives without a strategic use of these in their own countries in mind”. The consequence was that the package is called ‘Bologna process’ everywhere but the content varies from country to country (see for example Witte, 2006). It can therefore be safely assumed that the attitude towards a competition orientated system of higher education equally varies from country to country, from being more critical towards it, to supporting and promoting it.

The loose arrangement of the process has been criticised (Garben, 2010), others argue that the non-compulsory element is one of the strength of the process that furthermore benefits from a

² The Lisbon strategy was also known as Lisbon agenda or Lisbon process and was renamed Europe 2020 strategy in 2010.

participation of non-governmental actors (Balzer and Rusconi, 2007: 67). The participation of non-governmental actors was probably only made possible because of the lack of a sanctioning mechanism for governmental actors. In any case, those non-governmental stakeholders achieved a quite prominent role in the process on the European level and they bring in organisational higher education expertise. It is not possible to look at all these stakeholders here, but at least the three most important ones – in terms of their role over a longer period – should be briefly mentioned.

The ‘oldest’ organisation involved is the Council of Europe (CoE) that was established in 1949. Its membership is almost identical with that of the Bologna process which already indicates that the CoE was a strong advocate of expanding the membership of Bologna to its current status of 47 member states. The CoE (together with UNESCO) was also behind the Lisbon convention “on the recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region” of 1997, which subsequently became the most important legal instrument for the recognition of higher education degrees (Reichert and Tauch, 2003: 9) and a central reference point in the Bologna process. Represented from the outset of the process by Sjur Bergan,³ the CoE, without denying the relevance of the economic dimension, is not amongst the actors with a neo-liberal agenda for the EHEA:

I hast to underline that contributing to the economic well-being *is* an important purpose of higher education. My point is simply that current public debate is too one sided, and that by creating the impression that higher education has only one basic purpose, it contributes to reducing university autonomy. (Bergan, 2008: 117; italics in original)

Autonomy for universities is also a central point for the European University Association (EUA) which represents in particular universities (in contrast to other higher education institutions) in the process. In a way the EUA is a child of Bologna as it is the merger of two separate organisations in 2001, the year when it became a consultative member of the follow-up group of Bologna. Its stance on the competition issue is less clear. On the one hand, it supports the modernisation strategy for universities of the EU (see for example the Aarhus Declaration of 2011) and works closely together with the European Commission (Nagel, 2007). On the other hand, it clearly formulates the necessity to take into consideration the various purposes of higher education, stating in its Prague declaration of 2009 that universities need to be “aware of the importance of balancing the need for competitiveness with that of enhanced cooperation, social cohesion and solidarity” (EUA, 2009: 6). This position underlines the perception of the EUA as being a mediator between the interests of the European Commission, the national rectors organisations and the interests of their individual institutional members (Nagel, 2007: 59-60).

The representation of diverse interests is something the EUA shares with the European Students’ Union (ESU).⁴ Like the EUA, it joined the Bologna process in 2001. Although the ESU represents only one group – the students – the composition of this group is actually quite diverse. Yet, in the Bologna process, the ESU has one particular focus – the social dimension. It is therefore no surprise that Bologna in its economical dimension is viewed rather critically:

The Bologna Process goes beyond immediate economic priorities or obvious attempts to focus exclusively on fortunate small societal groups that contribute to the prestige of a country’s educational system. It is an integrating transformation that smoothes political and economical edges, while having social emancipation through education at its core. (ESU, 2009:5)

³ See also above.

⁴ Until 2007 the organisation was known as the National Unions of Students (ESIB)

Such a statement stands in a strong contrast to the competition agenda of Lisbon/Europe 2020 which turns attention to the last stakeholder looked at here: the European Commission.

In many ways, the Commission is the most controversial member of the Bologna process. Not only is it a full member with voting rights in the process (unlike the CoE, the EUA and the ESU), its Lisbon agenda has been perceived as a driving force behind the marketisation of European higher education. Eric Beerkens (2008: 417) for example 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 has increased” (Ibid.). Other authors (e.g. Keeling, 2006) share the perception of a dominant influence of the Commission in the Bologna process and while it is not the focus here to discuss the role of the European Commission in the EHEA, the prominence of its role provide, amongst other aspects, the explanation for including Lisbon/Europe 2020 in the evaluation of the competition dimension of the EHEA.

3 The competition dimension in the official documents

The EHEA does not mark the beginning of a European dimension in higher education nor is the aspect of competition new to higher education. Of particular importance here, is that competition cannot be fully understood as part of the Bologna process without making reference to the Lisbon/Europe 2020 strategy. It represents *the* competition agenda of the EU and therefore, due to the overlap in membership of Bologna and Lisbon/Europe 2020, potentially influences the competition dimension in the EHEA.

The scope of the argument here limits the discussion of the competition dimension to the main documents of the Bologna process and to the relevant documents of the Lisbon /Europe 2020 strategy. As the focus is on the EHEA, the following argument will start with the analysis of the competition element in the Bologna documents.

3.1 Competition in the EHEA

Although the argument here is not about a wider historical development it cannot be ignored that when talking about the Bologna documents attention has to be given not only to the ministerial communiqués and declarations but to at least two more documents: The Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988 and the Sorbonne declaration of 1998, both of which are referred to directly in the ‘original’ 1999 Bologna declaration. Both declarations share not only being mentioned in the Bologna declaration but they share another theme: the absence of a competition agenda.

The Magna Charta Universitatum on “fundamental University Values and Rights” was signed in 1988 in Bologna. The background of the signatories – around 400 rectors – might explain why 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 by 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 institution ‘university’ from it. To the rectors it is an institution that is more the “trustee of the European humanist tradition” than an actor in the knowledge *economy*. This ‘spirit’ appears to have been carried over to the Sorbonne declaration.

Ten years after the Magna Charta, the Sorbonne declaration was signed on the 25th of May 1998 by the (higher) education ministers of the four largest countries of the European Union (EU).⁵ It was an intergovernmental declaration that already focused on the main issues that became one year later part of the Bologna declaration – including the demand for the creation of a European area of higher education. Sorbonne can therefore be portrayed in a way as the initiating chapter of the Bologna process. However, while the Sorbonne declaration in many ways was closer to the Bologna declaration, there was one aspect that reminded one of the Magna Charta: the lack of a direct reference to competition.

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 of 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. The Sorbonne declaration states already in its first two sentences:

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 (employability) but the balance of the document was characterised by a less explicit reference to the economic role of universities. And if there are references to the general economic dimension, they are often presented in a context of negative examples. From this perspective, the declaration appears in parts to be almost an antithesis to a competition agenda.

The official launch of the Bologna process by the signing of the declaration on the 19th of June 1999 by the national ministers of 29 countries responsible for higher education marked a change in this regard. The document certainly does not carry with it anymore the connotation of an antithesis to a competition agenda or to a more general economic dimension. Competition – or more precisely competitiveness – became an issue. It is mentioned twice in the document. Both times it refers to increasing the international competitiveness of the European Higher Education system. The overall approach to the economic dimension of competition, though, remains rather modest. Even the potential tension between the economic and cultural dimension of higher education is presented in a less controversial way:

A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognised as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space.

⁵ France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany

At this stage of the process it is difficult to identify a neoliberal agenda in the written statements and this does not change fundamentally with the Prague communiqué two years later.

The communiqué of 19 May 2001 witnessed a rather strong emphasis on the issue of the mobility of all members of a university by declaring it as something “of the utmost importance”. While this emphasis reflects the general nature of Bologna, the aspect of mobility is multidimensional as it can be seen as a basis for competition but for example also as something that goes beyond a more narrowly defined economic dimension by representing an expression of freedom (on a systemic and individual level) or as a basis for a peaceful cultural exchange. In the Prague document, mobility is not directly associated with competition. The aspect of competitiveness focuses again more on the attractiveness of European higher education as a whole with one exception: the emphasis on lifelong learning “to face the challenges of competitiveness” implies not only an institutional level but the level of the individuals as well. But it is not only this aspect that hints at a stronger economic dimension of the Prague declaration. The topic of lifelong learning is used to introduce a reference to the “knowledge-based society and economy”. The use of the term ‘knowledge-based society and economy’ stands out because it does not differentiate between the implications of ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge economy’. While the discussion of the differences between the implications of both terms would go too far here, the way it is used in the document might actually not represent a lack of differentiation but rather an attempt of the authors of the document to represent the diverse views of the actors involved.

The inclusion of the Commission⁶ showed its first effects in the next step of the Bologna process, the Berlin communiqué of 2003. Here, a general reference to competitiveness already appears on the first page of the document. Although it is presented in the context of an equal need for “social characteristics” of the EHEA, the acknowledgement of the Lisbon strategy in the same paragraph reinforces the impression that competition is now more firmly integrated into Bologna. This is not underlined by an increased use of the term, but by a more concrete reference to three particular aspects: stocktaking, employability and research.

Berlin for the first time introduced the mechanism of stocktaking to evaluate the progress of the member states in the areas of quality assurance, two-cycle system and recognition of degrees and periods of study in the upcoming period until the next ministerial conference. Stocktaking potentially introduced a competitive element to the process as the progress of the member states as regards the three categories can be measured directly against each other.⁷

In contrast to stocktaking, the aspect of employability of graduates is not new to the process but it gets more emphasis in the Berlin document by including references to the employers (for the first time) or to general “labour market needs”. The increased emphasis, though, is arguably limited which cannot be said about the research focus. Here, the Berlin document for the first time in the Bologna process sought to link the teaching and research dimension into a more comprehensively defined whole by introducing doctoral programmes as the third cycle in higher education. Thereby the aim was to bring the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA) closer together. This in itself might not be that contentious but research certainly carries with it a stronger economic connotation than the learning and teaching focus of

⁶ See above

⁷ The effect of the stocktaking and the resulting country reports with their ‘traffic light’ indication remained limited in the following years. The underlying ‘name and shame approach’ was difficult to push through in a non-compulsory process (emphasized in various interviews in 2011 with representatives from different stakeholder groups)

Bologna. And the document does not deny that research can help to make higher education institutions “an even more attractive and efficient partner”.

The research focus returns attention to the Lisbon strategy which is less concerned with learning and teaching than with research. However, it would be too easy to relate an increase in the economic focus of Bologna to the European Commission as the ‘driver’ of Lisbon and member of Bologna. Interviews taken with various European stakeholders of the Bologna process actually show that in the relevant period here (between 2001 and 2003) the Commission representatives were perceived as playing a constructive role in the process without attempting to push through an EU agenda and that some of the more influential national representatives had themselves an interest in exactly those economic dimensions as part of a reform of their national higher education systems.

While the exact assignment of the individual contributions to the Berlin document cannot be resolved here, the nature of the type and scope of the other stakeholders involved in Bologna (beyond the full members) finds its expression in the formulation of the text of the document that almost always attempts to balance out an economic emphasis by additional reference to aspects like the preservation of diversity or the need to include a social dimension.

The general approach to competition and the economic dimension more generally does not change fundamentally in the next ministerial communiqué of Bergen 2005. The importance of research as contributing to the competitiveness of the EHEA gets reinforced and the balancing approach between somewhat opposing aspects of higher education reaches a new dimension. The document states that the “social dimension of the Bologna process is a constituent part of the EHEA and a necessary condition for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA.” While it is perfectly plausible to argue that a society that does not help and support its economically disadvantaged to reach their full potential loses out in many ways, the way the ‘marriage’ of the concept of competition and the social dimension is presented in the text leaves open the possibility of understanding it in the direction that the social dimension serves the competitiveness of the EHEA rather than being an objective in its own right. Although this interpretation might require more in-depth research into the discussion process in the preparatory group, it nevertheless highlights again the inherent tension of a process with a rather diverse mixture of stakeholders, representing different approaches to higher education in the Bologna process at the European level. And this diversity gets further increased in Bergen by the inclusion of the representation of trade unionism (Education International – EI) and a European representation of employers (Union of Industrial and Employers’ Confederation of Europe – UNICE). Both actors potentially add a new level to the framing of the competition aspect in Bologna even if a simple listing of stakeholders involved in the process does not say anything about their influence. In any case, the supporter of a strong economic dimension in the Bologna process appeared to have gained an advantage at the following ministerial conference in London 2007.

Against the background of the first signs of the global financial crisis, and arguably reflecting the priorities of the conference’s British hosts, 2007 witnessed a communiqué that had the strongest focus on competition so far. Already the title of the London communiqué – “Towards the European Higher education Area: responding to challenges in a globalised world” – marks a considerable difference to previous, one-dimensional titles by emphasising that Bologna is about action *and* reaction. Challenges in a globalised world are therefore just another way of describing an increasingly competitive environment. Reflecting the balancing nature of Bologna, one finds an acknowledgement that globalisation is more than just economic competition, but more attention is given to the economic expression of competition. As the ministers already state on the first page:

As we look ahead, we recognise that, in a changing world, there will be a continuing need to adapt our higher education systems, to ensure that the EHEA remains competitive and can respond effectively to the challenges of globalisation.

What is probably more surprising than the reference to globalisation in the title is the complete absence of the word in the previous documents. London, maybe awakened by the developing global financial crisis, corrected this shortcoming by stressing the global dimension a few times in the communiqué and marking it as a priority for action for the next ministerial conference in 2009.

From the perspective of the above analysis it does not surprise that other economic dimensions also get more attention and here notably employability. Already a simple count indicates its increased prominence: employability is referred to directly eight times, whereas in the previous documents this was done never more than twice. Consequently, it receives its own subcategory in the document (for the first time) and is also earmarked as priority for action until 2009. Needless to add at this stage, the London communiqué makes more direct references to competition than any of the other documents before or after it. It is, though, still limited (five times) and always in connection with the level of the EHEA.

Two years later, the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve communiqué of 2009 marked in its economic expression a retreat in comparison to London. The seemingly obvious explanation for that is the global financial crisis that had reached its peak in 2008 with the collapse of the American investment bank Lehman Brothers. The challenges of globalisation appeared afterwards in a different light, also for Bologna. Globalisation was not absent in the communiqué of Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, but its application was more limited. Employability still rates highly in the document, but direct references to competition were only made twice: once in the more usual way of connecting it to the general European level, but also once by referring to competition between higher education institutions. This was not expressed before in this way, but what is potentially more interesting is the fact that this kind of competition is presented in the subcategory of ‘mobility’.

As has been pointed out above, mobility is the central theme in Bologna but its importance was in more recent documents reduced to “one of the key objectives” (Bergen 2005) or to “one of the core elements” (London 2007) of the Bologna process. Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve marked a change as the document states that “mobility shall be the hallmark of the European Higher Education Area” – not just one of a few. It almost appears that this reference tries to close the circle by going back to the roots of the Sorbonne declaration and its strong underlining of the mobility aspect. Yet, as the reference to competition already indicates, mobility in 2009 is not just a goal in itself. It can serve economic purposes including an improved employability for those being mobile. But the same applies here that has been stated for various points previously: there are always attempts in the documents to balance out economic references. The next event in the line of the Bologna process meetings confirms this balancing act.

The official launch of the EHEA was marked by Budapest-Vienna declaration of 2010. It was a more ceremonial meeting and therefore has to be viewed differently from the previous ministerial meetings.⁸ The resulting document was also much shorter at only two pages.⁹ Nonetheless, a few observations can be made in relation to the document.

⁸ The next regular ministerial conference takes place in Bucharest on the 27th and 28th of April 2012, thereby changing the regular cycle of meeting every two years (i.e. the last regular meeting was the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve conference).

⁹ The previous documents, however, were not very long either with an average length of about six pages.

Overall the declaration does certainly not represent the strongest statement for a competition driven EHEA. This honour goes to the London communiqué. Yet, the weighing up of the different aspects of the roles and purposes of the EHEA led in the case of Budapest-Vienna to the economic dimension framing the content of the document. The first substantial point in the text is made by arguing that the “Bologna Declaration in 1999 set out a vision for 2010 of an internationally competitive [the only direct reference to competition in the text] and attractive European Higher Education Area” and the last substantial point brings in again research with its strong economic factor: “By continuously developing, enhancing and strengthening the European Higher Education Area and taking further the synergies with the European Research Area, Europe will be able to successfully face the challenges of the next decade.”

As the next communiqué is about to be published, it will be interesting to see how the competition aspect and the related more concrete aspects will be presented. Undoubtedly, given the nature of the actors involved, it will be again a more balanced approach. And it is unlikely the general references to competition will be change fundamentally.

At this stage of the process it is possible to identify four levels of competition in the statements: 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 operationalisation of how to reach an increased competitiveness of the EHEA also implies an increase of competition on those levels. Before getting to a more detailed evaluation of the competition aspect in Bologna it is necessary to include a closer look at the Lisbon strategy which has already been referred to at some points in the above analysis.

3.2 Influencing the EHEA – the competition agenda of the EU

Trying to identify a competition dimension in the Lisbon/Europe 2020 strategy documents would be a bit like trying to identify trees in a forest given that Lisbon/Europe 2020 is, as has been stated before, the competition agenda of the EU. Its often quoted ultimate ambition is for the EU “to become the most competitive and dynamic based knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council, 2000). The quote already indicates that Lisbon/Europe 2020 is more than just education or as one European Commission official puts it: “Lisbon is everything; Lisbon is an abbreviation for the whole economic and social political development of the EU”.¹⁰ Thereby, knowledge production is central to the strategy with an initial focus in the documents on the contribution of the research sector. This fact together with Lisbon as the “large matrix” that almost dwarfed the Bologna aspirations had the consequence that at the launch of the Lisbon strategy in 2000, no direct reference was made to the Bologna process in the document.

It is not the goal here to analyse why Bologna was not mentioned in the Lisbon document of 2000. It is, however, worth pointing out that many of the goals of the Bologna process can be traced back to EU initiatives (e.g. mobility (Erasmus) and credit points (ECTS)). Furthermore, a communication from the European Commission in 1997 entitled “Towards a Europe of Knowledge” was not only a statement about the renewal of the EU’s own higher education

¹⁰ Interview, 28.01.2011

programs (European Commission, 2006a: 181) but also appeared in its low profile on competition to be much closer to the original declarations of Sorbonne and Bologna than to the Commission's own agenda of 2000. In any case, the necessary clarification for the role of the universities in the Lisbon strategy came in 2003, two years after the Commission had joined the Bologna process and a bit over half a year before the Berlin communiqué was published. In the communication "The role of the universities in the Europe of Knowledge" (2003) the Commission made direct reference to the title of the 1997 communication but the nature of the document had changed. As the document was published within the framework of the Lisbon strategy, the low profile approach to competition was naturally gone. The communication argues that "the European universities are not at present globally competitive with those of our major partners" (Ibid.: 2). As a consequence, the multiple references to competition in the text are mainly in connection with the institutional level (and then with the European level). Four more aspects are interesting when analysing the competition dimension of the document:

1. The existence of different levels of competition is emphasised by pointing at the "[c]ompetition 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 the universities and industry is plainly laid out by arguing that from a "competitiveness perspective it is vital that knowledge flows from universities into business and society" (Ibid.: 7).
3. Although a reference is made to the whole world, the main competitor focused on is the USA.
4. The European area for research and innovation is clearly defined as a target for the Lisbon strategy.

Especially the research aspect is one that can be found again in the Berlin communiqué (see above) and therefore raises the question of the influence of the Commission. The Commission itself puts it bluntly by stating that it "supports and helps to foster the Bologna process" (Ibid. 11). In the coming years, it almost looked like that the Commission needed Bologna more than it initially anticipated because of the Lisbon strategy experiencing a setback resulting in a restart in 2005.

The restart was unavoidable after the evaluation of the strategy in a report produced under the chair of the former Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok (High Level Group, 2004). Its relevance for the argument here is based on the spirit of competition presented in the document. One of the key recommendations to reshape the Lisbon strategy for example states in the year after the introduction of the stocktaking reports for the Bologna process:

The European Commission should deliver, to the Spring European Council in the most public manner possible, an annual league table of Member State progress towards achieving the 14 key indicators and targets. Countries that have performed well should be praised, those that have done badly castigated. (Ibid.: 43)

It is difficult to imagine for such an approach to be carried over to culturally more sensitive area like higher education. Yet, soon after the restart of Lisbon (European Commission, 2005) and just one month before the Bergen communiqué, the European Commission seemed to have carried over the nature of the Kok report into their new communication to outline the role of the universities for the revised Lisbon strategy. In "Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon strategy" (2005a) the commission plays the blame game by declaring that "European Universities, motors of the

new, knowledge-based paradigm, are not in a position to deliver their full potential contribution to the re-launched Lisbon strategy” (Ibid.: 2). By further arguing that “[m]ost universities are strongly dependent on the state and ill prepared for worldwide competition over talent, prestige and resources” it looks like the authors of the text just stopped short of blaming the countries of origin of those universities. Everything in higher education seems to serve a competition purpose to the point that the existence of universities appears to be only justified by such a service function as “European universities also need to become more attractive partners for industry.”(Ibid.: 9). Outlining such a negative and one-dimensional purpose of universities, the Commission just falls short of proposing European benchmarks in higher education but then ‘realises’ that it “does not propose” (Ibid. 11) such benchmarks.

The demanding language of the 2005 communication might have been a result of a limited time scale. The next higher education document as part of the Lisbon strategy was released in 2006 (“Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities”). While upholding some of the principles of the previous document, its language had changed and presented the arguments in a less provocative tone. In some respects it even reminds one of the more balancing approaches of the Bologna documents. For example, when the document argues that **“European universities are not currently in a position to achieve their potential in a number of important ways”** (bold print in original), the following paragraphs clarify that this does not imply that all universities are moving in the same direction (Ibid.: 4). In addition, while “R&D and universities [are] acknowledged as foundations of European competitiveness” the identified need for modernisation is also seen as **“reinforcing the societal roles** of universities in a culturally and linguistically diverse Europe” (Ibid.: 2; bold print in original). Even the still strong statement about the necessity for a close relationship between the universities and the business community (Ibid.: 6) at least gets add another perspective by criticising industry for not developing “sufficient absorption capacity to harness the potential of university-based research” (Ibid.:4). In addition, the authors of the paper acknowledge more clearly than before the responsibility of the member states and the limits of the role of the Commission: the member states are in charge of modernising their university systems (Ibid.: 4) and the Commission is “not a direct actor in the modernisation of universities” (Ibid.: 11).

This modesty, though, should not distract from the fact that the 2006 communication is still about competitiveness. It is about the competitiveness of the higher education institution, it is about competitive funding and it is about the role of research in this and the contribution of the Bologna process: **“Continuing globalisation means that the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area must be fully open to the world and become worldwide competitive players”** (Ibid.: 9-10; bold print in original). But this quote not just underlines the relevance of Bologna for the Lisbon strategy, it also introduces the term ‘globalisation’ in the higher education documents of Lisbon – one year before it emerges for the first time in the London communiqué. Beyond that, the term also indicates that the initial focus on the USA as competitor (2003) via the expansion in the 2005 document (USA, Japan and South Korea and to a certain degree Canada) has multiplied and finally reached the global scale.

Regardless of such efforts by the European Commission, the Lisbon strategy as a whole continued to struggle to reach its objectives. Ultimately, this led in 2010 to a second restart of the project now under the name of ‘Europe 2020’, followed in autumn 2011 by the accompanying more detailed explanations for the higher education sector (“Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe’s higher education systems”).

In many ways the 2011 document of the Commission continues with the approach of the 2006 paper, to a degree that some sentences highlighted in the text are almost identical. And

although the central dimension of competition is not questioned it receives some qualification, for example by realising that a single focus on competition is not automatically positive when “higher education institutions too often seek to compete in too many areas” (Ibid.: 2). Or similarly the recognition that “**higher education institutions can drive economic development**” (Ibid.: 8; bold print in original) – can drive, not *must* drive. From a different perspective such statements could also be seen as representing a pullback from the aspiration of competitiveness on a systemic level to one on the level of the individual institutions (elite universities or universities of excellence). Such a perception is reinforced by the presentation of a further competitiveness instrument: a ranking device called U-Multirank, intended to provide “a **new performance-based ranking and information tool for profiling higher education institutions**, aimed to radically improve the transparency of the higher education sector” (Ibid.: 11; bold print in original). This instrument also marks a turn by the Commission towards more concrete measures seeking to foster greater competitiveness, outlining more clearly than before (arguably starting from a low level) key policy issues for the member states and the higher education institutions, and defining more areas for its own “contributions”. In addition to the ranking tool these are mainly

- the establishment of “a high level group with a rolling mandate to analyse key topics for the modernisation of higher education” (Ibid.: 16; bold print in original) and
- a contribution “to strengthening synergies between the EU and intergovernmental processes” (i.e. the EHEA) based on the multiple overlaps (e.g. mobility, employability, ECTS, degree recognition) of the goals of both, Europe 2020 and Bologna (Ibid.: 12).

The reference point for the goals of Europe 2020 is the knowledge triangle of education, research and business¹¹ which is supposed to serve as an orientation not only for the Commission and the members states but also for the universities who not only play a central role in the knowledge triangle but are also faced in there with competition from business and non-university research organisations (Ibid.: 12).

Generally speaking, Europe 2020 represents an approach to a concept of competition that was lacking before. It further introduced concrete steps for who should do what in the modernisation process. Yet, the document of 2011 continues with two fundamental shortcomings that were carried over from the Lisbon strategy: the Commission does not take into consideration the different conditions of the various subject areas, and it completely ignores the potential problems of the relationship between business/industry and higher education.

4 The conditions of competition

What competition?

Guy Neave (2009: 28) describes competition as being “amongst the most powerful technical and political rationales behind contemporary reform in Europe’s systems of higher education”. It is difficult to argue against such a view but when reading the official documents

¹¹ In the context of the European Research Area (ERA) and in particular in reference to the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), the Commission itself writes of a knowledge triangle of research, education and innovation, i.e. not business (see for example: http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/understanding/what/era_in_the_knowledge_triangle_en.htm - accessed on 26 March 2012)

of the EHEA one has to ask the question: what competition? The main answer the Bologna documents provide is that of improving the international competitiveness of the EHEA without actually naming the other international competitors (unlike Lisbon/Europe 2020) directly.

The nature of Bologna, with its focus on learning and teaching, would imply that aspects like employability and mobility represent an operationalisation of the competition aspect at the level of the individual. However, as has been pointed out above, these aspects are multidimensional and – especially against the backdrop of the stakeholders involved – are not automatically an expression of competition only. Overall, the competition issue in the Bologna documents is, given its reputation, rather modest with some variation over time.

The competition dimension in the Lisbon/Europe 2020 communications is certainly not modest. Especially the original Lisbon strategy deals with and demands various levels of competition (the individual, the institutional, the sectoral (research), the national and the international level) often without a clear structure of how to reach the different goals. Competition in these expressions seems to apply to everything and everyone in higher education, without a consistent systematic differentiation of the levels of competition and the resulting implications.

While the Europe 2020 strategy tries to improve in this regard, 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 case of the EHEA the influence of interacting rationales behind the development was also a contributing element: in the cases of Sorbonne and Bologna, competitiveness was not the main driving force. There was a whole set of factors influencing senior politicians in different countries.¹² 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.¹³

The limits of competition

There are other aspects in the documents that pose a potential dilemma if viewed in their full scope. In one case, differentiation of field of studies, the authors almost completely ignored the diverse conditions implying varying degrees of ‘usefulness’ for purposes of competition. Similarly, the use of the term innovation also suffers from a lack of differentiation. Its use in the documents seems to apply a focus on technical innovations and not on social innovations (Välimaa, 2009: 34). The problem with potential misconceptions does not stop here. The probably most misunderstood concept in this regard is institutional autonomy. As one of the central demands of the Bologna process it can be perceived differently in various countries. Mitchell G. Ash (2008: 49) for example points at the different understanding of autonomy in Germany, where it still implies some sort of increased institutional freedom, and the UK, where it is more associated with marketisation, i.e. it appears that the discrepancy in cultural and political conditions for ‘autonomy’ is not fully taken into account. From a different perspective, though, it might be that the “instrumentalization of Institutional Autonomy” that

¹² Interview, 03.05.2011; this resulted in the already mentioned “different uses in mind” while signing the declarations (Ravinet, 2008)

¹³ 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.

“reflects the unavoidable fact that today the market is deemed to be the prime driving force of higher education” (Neave, 2009a: 16) has not yet fully reached Germany.¹⁴ One might gain more autonomy from the state but in exchange becomes more dependent on other forces. This dependence on other forces is also an issue for the funding of universities.

The diversification of the funding of an institution is considered to be a central element for advancing the autonomy of the universities. The logic behind the diversification of funding instead of relying on a single source to increase autonomy carries a certain logic with it. Yet, as Sjur Bergan (2008: 116-7) observes:

A development toward a diversity of funding sources could ... potentially strengthen university autonomy, but this potential is largely undercut by the predominance of earmarked rather than “free” funding from other sources as well as by the conditions attached to some of this funding.

The consequence is that the policies of the institutions are directly affected by the need to get this kind of earmarked funding and they become even more dependent on the requirements of the markets that provide funding to satisfy their economic needs. Thereby the funding and its consequence for the definition of institutional autonomy create a risk for the universities as their close alignment with the market makes them “more vulnerable than ever before and more speedily so, to the market’s vagaries and fortunes” (Neave, 2009a: 16). The Bologna documents seem to reflect a growing awareness of this as the competition dimension was most prominently expressed in the London communiqué of 2007. The following global economic crisis did also affect the universities and their funding and, as a consequence, Leuven 2009 produced a communiqué with a reduced emphasis on competition and the economic dimension.

The global financial crisis showed at the same time that the consequences for the individual countries can vary dramatically. This is due to the specific conditions in each country and this again leads to the obvious conclusion that the economic performance and competitiveness of a higher education system, but also that of its individual members, can be determined by issues like the economic power of the state, the international relevance of its language and simply the size of the state (Teichler, 2004: 21). The implication is that even in times of globalisation, the state does still matter and continues “to play a major role in setting the frames for international communication, cooperation and mobility as well as for international competition” (Ibid.). This helps to understand why the Bologna process produced a rather limited approach to competition. As a voluntary intergovernmental process its governmental members represent a wide and diverse range of states. For the process to work it would arguably have been counterproductive to focus more directly on institutional competition or even on one amongst the member states. This is arguably one important reason why competition was not a central theme in Sorbonne but rather the aspect of mobility. And this aspect has been underlined again in the 2009 communiqué reinforcing the categorisation of Bologna as a mobility agenda that can serve competition but that probably serves more the spirit of integration. The Lisbon/Europe 2020 strategy in contrast is the competition agenda of the EU and it is not just an agenda for structural change like Bologna but represents a policy approach. Furthermore, the initiator of the strategy, the European Commission, can act more freely within its one sphere and is less limited by the need to compromise as it has to do in the Bologna process. This allowed it to take a more direct approach to competition as part of Lisbon/Europe 2020. Yet, the seemingly greater freedom within the context of Lisbon/Europe 2020 was limited by the fact that higher education after all is the cultural and legal prerogative of the member states. The Commission therefore had to adjust its approach and show greater

¹⁴However, it did not go unnoticed (see e.g. Thumfart, 2010: 487)

sensitivity as regards the member states' central responsibility for the university sector (as has been done in the Europe 2020 strategy). At the end Bologna might be more limited in terms of a competition agenda but at least within its context competition can be discussed amongst those directly affected.

More than just competition

The inclusion of various stakeholders in the Bologna process had a limiting effect in another way. The reduction of higher education to an instrument that serves globalisation and the resulting demands for (economic) competition is not as clearly visible in Bologna as it is in Lisbon/Europe 2020. Potentially such an instrumentalisation of higher education affects “the links to society at large that are needed to safeguard the mission of the University to serve the interest of the community” (Bricall and Monaco, 2008: 69).

It is probably not difficult to find support for such a statement against narrowing down higher education. Yet, in its various expressions, the instrumentalisation is not as obvious anymore. Rankings, for example, attract a lot of attention even if they are also criticised. They do narrow down higher education to certain categories and the universities who want to have a chance of appearing in an international ranking have to aim at performing well in those categories. Still, some will not have a chance of getting into such a ranking as the places on the lists are extremely limited given the number of institutions of higher education worldwide. It is therefore in a way the ultimate competition and the European Commission wants to take part in it with the ambition of producing a more complex ranking that covers more aspects. It is not possible to comment on the EU ranking at this stage but it remains doubtful whether it will fundamentally change the downsides of rankings. It might just be intended as another source of information but if it is successful it will be more than that whatever the intention of the Commission might be.

Higher education is more than just economics. It has also a cultural and a political dimension (Robertson, 2009: 65-6) and it has social goals that can lead to conflicts with a marketisation approach (Crouch, 2003: 6). This is not to state that economics are not important or less important than other goals it is just that whatever the approach is, the emphasis of one dimension carries the element of exclusion in it. The Council of Europe, for example, tries to meet this danger by broadly outlining its perception of the purposes of higher education in the following summary terms (quoted in: Bergan, 2008: 117):¹⁵

- preparation for sustainable employability;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development;
- the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base

Not surprisingly there is no direct reference to competition and even the aspect of employability appears in a different light by adding the term ‘sustainable’. Neither Bologna and in particular not Lisbon/Europe 2020 were able to produce such a statement as part of their declarations, communiqués and communications.

¹⁵ For the original document, see: Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research (adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 16 May 2007 at the 995th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

4 – Conclusion

The basic questions of this paper were on the logics and limits of competition in the EHEA. The analysis leaves one with mixed feelings because the EHEA is at least as much about integration and cooperation as it is about improving the economic strength and the competitiveness of the EHEA. The resulting tensions between these two sides are in particular visible in the Bologna documents, but they are not clearly addressed as potentially opposing forces. Lisbon/Europe 2020 chooses a different approach by almost exclusively (with variations over time) focusing on the economic dimension. This in itself is no criticism as the competence of the Commission is more located in matters of economic relevance than in areas of higher education and it reflects the wider European integration process that from the beginning used the economic approach to stimulate further integration. Yet, the approach used for higher education leaves open the question (especially in case of the 2005 Lisbon communication) whether there was any awareness involved towards the cultural sensitivity of the topic. Beyond that, until the establishment of Europe 2020, the Commission demanded competitiveness without a clear concept presented in the documents. This applies to the Bologna process too but due to its less emphasised take on competition, it does not appear as much of shortcoming as in the Lisbon strategy. What all the documents are missing, though, is the recognition of potential negative effects of a too close alignment with industry. This is not to say that the industry or the market is by definition a negative influence. Yet, the actors concerned have interests and views which are primarily focused on staying competitive in the global market and, for example, less on advancing the knowledge of society as a whole.

It appears that the strong economic element of the EHEA is something of an overreaction to the pressure of globalisation where the feeling prevails that if systems are not adjusted to this new environment European higher education will be fundamentally weakened. That is why competitors are identified (USA, Japan etc.), but they are not questioned in terms for example of what price they pay for being ahead in rankings. And it might also explain, together with the influence of Lisbon/Europe 2020, why Bologna is actually perceived as more of a competition agenda than the documents imply.

This is not an argument against reform or change. And forms of competition have and deserve their place in higher education – they are needed. But an integration project like the single European Higher Education Area deserves more than just more elite students at more elite universities. This would be indeed a step backwards into the time of the travelling students and their privileges.

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