



## AUQA

### Response to Discussion Paper

#### The Bologna Process and Australia: Next Steps

May 2006

1. The Minister of Education, Science and Training the Honorable Julie Bishop MP has circulated the paper 'The Bologna Process and Australia: Next steps' for comment. In addition to presenting the reader with an overview of the Bologna Process, the paper discusses the benefits of Bologna compatibility for Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. The paper finishes by asking the question what Bologna compatibility would involve and invites submissions and responses to the issues raised or other issues of importance to the discussion.
2. AUQA appreciates the invitation to submit its comments and welcomes the opportunity to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the Bologna process and the relevance of benchmarking the Australian higher education system against the Bologna objectives.

#### The main purpose of the Bologna Process

3. When discussing the implications of the Bologna process on the Australian higher education system, it is important to keep in mind that the Bologna process was originally initiated to increase the competitiveness of European higher education. In the late nineties, it was the perception that the European universities were losing ground, not least to the US universities.
4. This view is still predominant. The Economist on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2005 published an analysis of the standing of the European universities in a series of articles. The point made, in several of the articles, is that the European universities are falling behind, primarily because of the public funding system which is too restricted to sufficiently let the universities develop as necessary, and secondly the dominant role of the state in the development and evolution of the university sector. The claim is that tight government control deprives the universities of the possibility of reacting appropriately to the challenges of the future. The article 'Head in the Clouds', with the subtitle 'Europe hopes to become the world's pre-eminent knowledge-based economy. Not likely', presents the view that:

The Bologna Declaration signed in 1999, is intended to produce a single European higher educational "space" by introducing a combination of comparable qualifications and transferable credits.....This combination of increased transparency and enhanced mobility is bound to promote competition among universities. But it is all too little too late. There has been little or no progress on introducing realistic fees, freeing universities from government control or concentrating research in elite universities.

5. OECD in a brief to the Lisbon Council in March 2006 identified the same types of challenges ahead of the European universities. Two of the main points in the brief are that the European universities need to ensure that the growth and development of tertiary educational systems are managed to improve access, raise quality and enhance equity, and that universities should be encouraged to evolve so their leadership and strategic management capacity matches that of modern businesses with appropriate strategic, financial and accountability requirements to ensure long-term financial sustainability.
6. It is also an often quoted criticism from European universities, eg in the 'Trends IV report' prepared by the European University Association (EUA) that lack of the necessary degree of institutional autonomy to make key decisions or to be active in assuring external financial resources to manage restructuring processes is a barrier to an efficient implementation of the Bologna reforms.
7. These analyses emphasise the point that the Bologna process is a reaction or solution to the challenges faced by the European higher education sector. The core question is if the Bologna process will achieve the intended long term objectives and as a consequence will be able to continue to receive the support from all the ministers of education and thus keep its momentum in the long run. There are occasional indications that the joint agreement, which seem to have existed hitherto, on the Bologna objectives may well come under pressure. An example is the recent statement made by the UK minister of education that it could be necessary for the UK to introduce two year degrees to attract more students from poorer background to higher education.
8. Furthermore it rests to be seen if the reforms will have side effects which were not intended and which will not have a positive effect on the development of European higher education generally and the achievement of the Bologna objectives in particular. Some European academics for example are concerned about the negative effects brought about by the focus on teaching (as opposed to learning) especially through the introduction of the bachelor degree. The consideration of possible answers to these questions is important when assessing the relevance for Australia of establishing closer links with the Bologna Process.
9. Although the Bologna process was launched seven years ago, there is not a lot of information available about outcomes and improvements as a result of the process and the reforms. It would be interesting to know if, eg recognition of degrees and credit transfer have been effectively facilitated, and if the employment rates for bachelor graduates have improved due to an easier uptake on the labour market. It would add value to the discussion if the Bologna discussion paper could be succeeded by an analysis and assessment of what the benefits of the reforms have been in Europe.

### **The Bologna degree system**

10. The main objectives of the Bologna Process are the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees which should be achieved through the introduction of a system of two main degree cycles, a system of credits, promotion

of mobility, cooperation in quality assurance, and introduction of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

11. It is an often quoted assumption that Bologna has introduced a 3+2+3 study structure in Europe. The objective to introduce comparable degrees does not imply the adoption of identical degrees, however. Bologna does require first cycle degrees of minimum three years' duration and second cycle studies leading to master or doctoral degrees. Within this framework there is room for variability in scope and duration. Furthermore, several countries have adopted the 'Bologna degrees' in addition to their original degrees, eg Germany, the UK and Ireland.
12. The so-called TEEP (Transnational European Evaluation Project) project, implemented by ENQA and funded by the European Commission in 2003 had as one of its objectives to assess the extent to which the programs<sup>1</sup> which were included in the project have established first cycle degrees (Bachelor degrees). The project showed that in those countries where the Bologna structures have been integrated into national higher education legislation, the universities are implementing the new structures. This is not to the same degree the case in countries where the Bologna structures have been added to the existing higher education degree system.
13. When assessing the level of harmonisation of the degree structure, the level of flexibility in the interpretation of the Bologna requirements and the existing differences in national legislation have to be taken into account.

### **Recognition of qualifications**

14. The Diploma Supplement has been incorporated in the Bologna objectives, but it is not originally a Bologna idea. The Diploma Supplement was developed through UNESCO's discussions in relation to the Lisbon Convention. UNESCO has been, and still is, instrumental in commending and encouraging the use of the Diploma Supplement. At the time of the ministerial meeting in Bergen in 2005, 36 out of the 45 signatories of the Bologna Declaration had also ratified the Lisbon Convention.
15. Australia ratified the Lisbon Convention (in 2002), and is therefore obliged to promote the use of the Diploma Supplement. The discussion paper mentions the trial of the Diploma Supplement in Australia which was initiated by DEST in 2002 to meet this obligation. Australia has reported positively on its progress in this area to UNESCO's regional committee in 2003 and 2005, but the discussion paper gives a much less sanguine impression of the stage and utility of its implementation in Australia. As the Diploma Supplement is not only a means of facilitating recognition of qualifications in Europe, but in all countries which are signatories of the Lisbon Convention, Australia should make it a high priority to share its positive experiences of the Diploma Supplement. It will be particularly valuable to have input from a country outside the European area.
16. Both the Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) have been important elements in the strategy to increase the transparency of the

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<sup>1</sup> 5 History programmes, 5 Physics programmes and 4 programmes in Veterinary Science in a total of 11 different countries.

national higher education degrees, to possibly facilitate recognition of qualifications, and thus the facilitation of mobility. The paper quotes the Bergen Communiqué which concludes that none of the systems are perfect and there are various aspects that need further development. It is for example still a challenge for some European countries<sup>2</sup> to convert the basic unit from numbers of contact hours to workload. Sometimes the same subjects are awarded different numbers of credits depending on the program studied. Furthermore, there is no joint agreement on what the annual student workload should be. This means that the credit points refer to different workloads in different countries.

17. Despite the introduction of the Diploma Supplement and the ECTS, both recognition of degrees and transfer of credit are subject to separate and rigorous approval processes either at institutional or national level. The major benefit of the two initiatives, however, is the comparable systemic approach to the degree descriptions and credit transfer which has on the one hand increased the information available to institutions as well as improved the information available. One of the considerable strengths of the Bologna process is the increased transparency of and availability of information on the higher education system which are part of the common requirements in terms of available information.
18. Improved quality and rigorous quality assurance systems are also seen as some of the central keys to more automatic recognition of qualifications across Europe. Australia already has rigorous quality assurance in place for recognition of qualifications in the form especially the AQF, National Protocols, the ESOS Act and through it eg the National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to overseas students, and the CRICOS Register, and AUQA. Australia should concentrate on making an effort to emphasise that some of the challenges that Europe are struggling with are already being addressed in Australia through well-tested structures.

### **Qualifications frameworks**

19. Most recently, at their meeting in Bergen in May 2005, the European ministers of education have added to the Bologna Process an overarching framework of qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) comprising the three degree cycles. The overarching framework should be linked to national frameworks of qualifications. The qualifications frameworks are another mechanism to facilitate the recognition of degrees and increase mobility.
20. Australia has had a qualifications framework (the AQF) in place since 1995. The fact that the AQF is an embedded element of the Australian Quality Assurance Framework is an evident strength of Australia in relation to Europe, as well as other parts of the world. It should be mentioned that qualifications frameworks are being developed in a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region<sup>3</sup> as well as Canada. The development of qualifications frameworks is a mechanism with potential to offer a joint reference point system across borders regardless of regional affiliation. With the extensive Australian experience in this area, Australia could take a leading role in advancing the discussion and development

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<sup>2</sup> Trends IV: European Universities Implementing Bologna, Sybille Reichert and Christian Tauch, EUA Publications 2005

<sup>3</sup> Eg Hong Kong, India, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia.

of qualifications frameworks, eg in cooperation with other well developed qualifications system like the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, as a means of increasing transparency of higher education systems and degrees.<sup>4</sup> Such an initiative would be a benefit for eg governments, higher educations institutions, employers and students.

### **Increased transparency**

21. The discussion paper makes the point that compatibility of the Australian and European education systems would make the systems more transparent to students and employers from the respective regions. This is a desirable objective, but probably only likely to be obtainable in the very long term. When the Bologna Process was initiated, it was driven by a small number of groups consisting of government officials and specialists in the areas which are covered in the Bologna Declaration. This also seems to have been the case in many institutions where the implementation of the Bologna structure has been left to those staff members who were already involved in activities at the European level, eg in EUA working groups or the thematic networks. There is still work to be done to ensure that knowledge of Bologna and its implications is thoroughly embedded throughout the European universities.
22. To ensure that the benefits of the Bologna Process and its effects on the European education system are known to most employers is likely to be even harder. This was also noted by the European ministers at their meeting in Bergen. The Bergen Communiqué and the Trends IV report note that there is a need for greater dialogue, involving Governments, institutions and social partners, eg to increase the employability of graduates with bachelor qualifications.
23. Unlike pre-Bologna Europe, Australia already has a three year bachelor degree which is a first degree. Like Ireland and the UK, Australian universities also offer four year Bachelor degrees with honours which function as a 'graduate bachelor qualification'. In that respect there is already a degree of comparability between the Australian degrees and what is accepted within the European structures. This point should be promoted by Australia in the information provided to the European stakeholders.

### **Quality Assurance**

24. Quality assurance is one of the cornerstones in achieving the Bologna objectives. The ministers in Berlin in 2003 committed themselves to have national quality assurance systems in place and that the systems should involve: a) Evaluation<sup>5</sup> of programs or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results, and b) a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures. Similar to the requirements for the degree structure, there is a high level of flexibility in the application of the quality assurance procedures which allows members to adapt their procedures to their national context.

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<sup>4</sup> There is already a formal link between AQF and NZQA through NZQA's place on AQFAB.

<sup>5</sup> In Bologna evaluation is used as a generic term for quality assurance. Evaluation covers eg assessment, audit, and accreditation.

25. Australia already has an extensive Quality Framework for Higher Education, whose components are well-aligned with Bologna requirements. AUQA, Australia's national quality assurance body in higher education, responsible for auditing the Australian universities, is a central feature of this framework. Accreditation is carried out by various bodies, and AUQA audits the State and Territory Accrediting Agencies. AUQA's audits refer to the Australian Qualifications Framework, and the audit process includes the elements which are expected to be part of the European national quality assurance procedures (see point 24).
26. It is important that all stakeholders in Australian higher education have a high level of knowledge of the national quality audit procedures in order to promote the fact that Australia has a robust, coherent and intelligible national quality assurance system in place for the higher education sector. This message should not only be sent to Europe, but as importantly to our neighbouring countries in the Asia-Pacific region. It is also important that the system is continuously strengthened to be able to effectively deal with new challenges. One example of this is the possible extension of AUQA's responsibilities to cover auditing of the offshore activities of all higher education and not only those of the universities.
27. AUQA already has strong ties with its sister organisations in Europe both bilaterally and through its membership of networks of quality assurance agencies – the regional Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) of which the Executive Director of AUQA is the Secretary and Treasurer and two other staff are on the board, and the international network of quality assurance agencies (INQAAHE) where one AUQA staff member is an elected Board Director. These links enables AUQA to keep up-to-date with the development of the quality assurance systems in Europe and exchange information with European agencies about good practice in external quality assurance. The contact with the European agencies also has led to several delegations visiting AUQA and for AUQA to send a staff member on secondment in one of the German external quality assurance agencies in the second half of 2006 to benchmark AUQA against one of its German counterparts and against the European Standards and Guidelines for External Quality Assurance Agencies. AUQA has especially close ties with the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK (QAA) due to a range of similarities of the UK and Australian higher education systems and especially the quality assurance approaches. The UK and Australia are the two exporting countries of higher education which most systematically audit their universities' offshore activities.
28. It should be kept in mind when assessing the strength of the European national quality assurance systems that the European countries do not mutually recognise each other's evaluation judgements. This is due to a number of reasons, eg that mutual recognition would in many cases require changes to national legislation, the European countries apply different evaluation approaches,<sup>6</sup> and language (the evaluation processes and reports are typically conducted and written in the local language).

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<sup>6</sup> The five most commonly applied evaluation approaches in the European countries are: programme evaluation, programme accreditation, institutional audit, institutional evaluation and institutional accreditation (*Quality Procedures in European Higher Education, An ENQA Survey, ENQA Occasional Papers 5*)

29. That being said, the members of the European Consortium for Accreditation, which is a sub-network of ENQA, and whose members are the agencies in Europe whose main evaluation activity is programme accreditation, have committed themselves to develop a system for mutually recognising each other's accreditation decisions. The deadline is to have the procedures ready and tested to be able to decide in 2007, if it is feasible to introduce mutual recognition. Through the membership of the APQN Board and formal ties between APQN and ECA, an AUQA staff member is an observer to ECA.
30. AUQA is actively participating in the discussion about mutual recognition eg through the implementation of a joint audit of Monash University's South African Campus with the HEQC (Higher Education Quality Council) in August 2006 and by chairing a project group within the framework of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network. This priority is shared by the minister of Education the Honorary Julie Bishop. In the 'Brisbane Declaration' Julie Bishop mentioned the need to help define effectiveness of the higher education systems in the Asia-Pacific region and how this would include a review of approaches to mutual recognition of qualifications and quality.

### **Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for external quality assurance agencies**

31. The discussion paper questions whether AUQA should seek admission to the proposed European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies if it is opened up to include non Bologna signatories. AUQA would be in favour of such an approach. It will be a benefit for the Australian universities who seek to work with partners in Europe and for the reputation of the Australian quality assurance framework, if AUQA is approved to be on the Register as a bona fide agency meeting the European standards for quality assurance agencies.
32. AUQA is confident that its procedures are in compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for External Quality Assurance. The European standards and guidelines build on international good practice which has been discussed within the international quality assurance community since 1999, and AUQA has taken an active part in these discussions since its inception. The European Standards and Guidelines when developed were furthermore compared against the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice. AUQA's external review report, which will be published in June 2006, will document AUQA's compliance with the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice.

### **Concluding remarks**

33. When reflecting on the main question raised in the Bologna discussion paper, ie how important it is for Australia to seek to align its higher education sector with the outcomes of the Bologna Process, an alternative starting point could be to concentrate on identifying the strengths of the Australian higher education sector to ensure that they are continuously developed and ensure that there is clear information available about the Australian higher education system and not least the Australian quality assurance framework. Australia's main strengths with relevance for the Bologna agenda are: several years' experience with a higher education qualifications framework, extensive experiences with transnational

education and recognition of qualifications in that regard, the universities' internal quality assurance systems, external quality assurance procedures at the national level and the student fees system.

34. To date the Bologna Process has in several areas proved its worth as a means of improving the communication between the major stakeholder in the European higher education sector and has increased the transparency and the sources of information about European higher education. The Bologna Process is also interesting as an efficient example of cooperation of stakeholders across borders. At this stage there could be a particular value in seeking inspiration from the approaches and processes initiated by Bologna rather than the specific context and structures and decide if and how these approaches can be efficiently translated into an Australian and possibly an Asia-Pacific and/or APEC context.