



# Ten Years after the Sorbonne Declaration. What has Changed in European Study Structures

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**Ten years after the Sorbonne declaration,  
what changed in the European study structure?**

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Among the many changes experienced by European higher education systems, the implementation of the bachelor / master scheme is probably among the most challenging for these systems but also for higher education specialists. As rightly foreseen by Ulrich Teichler in a paper<sup>1</sup> published in 2001, within a few years most continental European countries have introduced the bachelor / master scheme. According to the last stocktaking exercise (Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2007, page 12) led for the London conference in May 2007, no country “has no students enrolled in a two-cycle degree system that is in accordance with the Bologna principles AND (...) no legislation in force to make the degree system compatible with the Bologna Principles” and only four countries have “less than 30% of all students (...) enrolled in a two-cycle degree system that is in accordance with the Bologna principles OR [have adopted a] legislation for a degree system in accordance with the Bologna principles [which] is awaiting implementation”. Even if the reliability of the stocktaking exercise may be questioned (Ravinet 2007; Veiga and Amaral, 2008), no doubt that the intergovernmental process born in Paris in 1998 and institutionalized in Bologna in 1999 succeeded in spreading a comparable training structure among all the 46 signing European countries.

It is indeed rare for a reform process to be implemented in so many countries within a rather short period of time. Two main explanations have been developed in order to explain this impressive movement. The first one deals with the commitment of the different countries to the process: once some ministries had signed, the others felt there was a risk to be left over if they do sign too. In other words, the two-tiered structure set a new path and provoked increasing returns effects (Arthur 1994, Pierson 2000). Among the four self-reinforcing

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<sup>1</sup> U. Teichler (2001) wrote (translated from German to English by me) : « Without big risks, the prognosis can be made that within a few years all continental-European countries will introduce a Bachelor – Master structure, with the exception of some specific domains like medicine and arts ».

mechanisms<sup>2</sup> which characterized such processes, adaptive expectations played a major role: all countries expecting the others to adopt the new study structure, they all adopted it. A second explanation focuses more on the reasons why the signing countries felt committed by their engagement, although their signature has a very limited constraining power. As shown by different authors (Ravinet, 2007; Veiga and Amaral, 2008) the progressive institutionalisation of the Bologna process and the on-going development of follow-up and benchmark instruments (such as the national reports and the stocktaking exercise) fostered the implementation of this non-binding agreement within the different countries.

Without minimizing this positive aspects in the implementation of this intergovernmental agreement, it should also be admitted that all the objectives which were attached to the new study structure are not reached yet. Building on some of the studies which have been led by different researchers in different countries and on the consequent comparative research led by INCHER on seven countries (Alesi et al., 2005 and Kehm and Teichler, 2006), this paper will in a first section come back to one of the main characteristic of these reforms: study structures in European higher education systems are more comparable but they are still not similar. Some of the mechanisms leading to this situation will be discussed in this first section. But in the two next ones, it will be argued that the question about whether and how far the different countries adopted the new study structure is only one aspect of the coin. Looking at the content of the new curricula and at the changes they introduced in the training schedules and timing, it will be shown that this reform far more transformed the curricula than simply introducing a two-tiered structure.

## **1. A comparable structure, but rather different reforms**

The national studies on the implementation of the two-tiered structure as well as the comparative reports or research which have been led all point at the same conclusion. In the signing countries the training structures are more and more comparable but they still are not similar. At least four main reasons have been developed to explain why the national situations still are not the same everywhere.

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<sup>2</sup> Four mechanisms lead to a process of increasing returns: large set-up or fix costs; learning effects; coordination effects and adaptive expectations. P. Ravinet (2007) shows that all of them can be observed about the two-tiered structure and self-reinforced this new study structure.

First, many comparative researches (for instance Alesi et al. 2005; Reichert and Tauch, 2005; Kehm and Teichler, 2006; Witte, 2006) show that many exceptions to the rule were maintained in the different countries,. Some of these exceptions are linked to specific disciplinary domains, like in medicine for example. But some institutional idiosyncrasies also remained unchanged. Among the many existing examples one can find in one country or another, there is for instance the case of the French IUTs (Instituts Universitaires de Technologie) which still provide two-year tertiary programmes after the *baccalauréat* (high school terminal exam) and deliver two-year degrees. On a larger scale, most of the masters in the United Kingdom last one rather than two years.

Second, some studies conclude to what can be called the “re-nationalisation of the Bologna process” (Musselin, 2008) showing that national governments used the implementation of the bachelor / master scheme to push further reforms which were on their national agenda. The “quality reform” in Norway is a very nice example for this (see for instance Gornitzka, 2006 or Michelsen, 2006) but further cases are to be found in other countries (Krücken et al., 2005; Krücken 2007; Moscati, 2008). In such cases, the bachelor / master scheme was not the central piece of the reforms and the full adoption of the new scheme was only accepted if it could help the other objectives of the reforms.

A third reason explaining why the implementation of this European process allowed national dynamics is linked to the fact that all countries were not starting from the same stand point and that each had to solve national specific issues, thus developing national specific solutions. Building on the literature about Europeanization processes one can look at the distance between the reforms pushed by the Bologna process and the national situations and thus appreciate the importance of the existing misfit (Börzel and Risse, 2001; Risse et al. 2001). Various kinds of misfits may be identified but I will concentrate here on the structural misfit, i.e. how distant was the study structure of a specific country to the study structure proposed by the Bologna structure (Witte, 2006). Three main cases can be distinguished.

If no country already had a study structure conform with the Bologna one, some countries were closer to it because the former existing structure was rather easy to translate into the

Bologna cycles. This was the case for countries like France, where the university<sup>3</sup> curricula were (mostly<sup>4</sup>) structured in five years and followed a 2 (*Deug*) +1 (*License*) +1 (*Maîtrise*) +1 (DEA or DESS) model. The adaptation to a 3+2 model was therefore rather simple: no new degrees were to be created and French academics first had to rethink the three first years of study as a single cycle rather than as two, and the second cycle as a two-year entity. The encouragements of the ministry for masters covering large and possibly multidisciplinary domains, as well as the fact that French academics understood the two-cycle structure as an opportunity to redesign the French teaching offer, led to intensive meetings and discussions, and sometimes to some tensions. But, all in all the reform has been led within four years and with no major resistance, a rare exception on the French higher education scene. Despite this rather easy going process, it would be excessive to speak of an absorption of the reform. It is far more an adaptation because the previous study structure has not been completely abandoned. Many masters for instance are organized in “spécialités” (specialties) which are themselves split into “mentions”, which often are rather close to the previous DEA or DESS. Even if the semestrialisation and the modularisation which accompany the reform, as well as the introduction of the ECTS, certainly transform the study structure within French universities, the relatively narrow gap between the Bologna structure and the before Bologna French structure has not been completely filled.

Within a second range of countries, the two-cycles structure provoked much bigger transformations. This is obviously the case when there was a single cycle leading to final degree in five to six years before. In most of the countries concerned (Germany, Italy, Norway...) the introduction of a tiered structure had already been on the agenda before but Bologna has been a decisive push to implement it. Each time these countries had to find their way in order to convince the representatives of the labour-markets (but also the students) of the value and relevance of the completely new bachelor degree. They also had to find solutions, each time specific in each country to reshape the former single curricula into a two cycles structure.

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<sup>3</sup> The situation was very different for the *grandes écoles* sector where the traditional way of access consisted in two years in *lycées* in classes preparing to highly selective exams and three years at the *grandes écoles*. Most of them decided to deliver masters but no bachelors.

<sup>4</sup> I mentioned above the specific case of the IUT...

In a last group of countries, like Belgium for instance, where the university study programme lasted 4 years, the challenge has been to add a supplementary year (within the same budget conditions), and thus to reorganize the existing curricula and “create” new courses.

Last but not least, the lack of coordination among countries and institutions characterizing the implementation phase, although each was confronted to rather different challenges constitutes a fourth and major explanation for the emergence of national specific forms of the bachelor / master scheme.

All this certainly minored the convergence and standardization forces which were expected from Bologna and quite a long way remained to be done to reach a truly European study structure. Such nuanced conclusions nevertheless do not subsume all the transformations introduced by the new structure. Less visible but not less consequent changes should also be taken into account in the evaluation of the implementation of the Bologna process. They first concern the curricula content and second what could be called the training production process.

## **2. How far did curricula change?**

A first question to raise deals with the impact of the new structure on the contents. Is the Bologna process a pure formal change or does it bring with it curricula transformation? The centrality of this issue has been clearly identified by U. Teichler (2001) when he questions the curricula model which should emerge from the Bologna process. According to him different and opposed solutions were under discussion: large versus specialized curricula, general versus professional curricula, reduction versus increase in disciplinary combinations; decrease versus rise in the possibility for optional classes. We know today that his prognosis that a similar study structure does not lead to one single logic of construction for the curricula is confirmed. The different oppositions he stressed can often be observed, even in the same country, when not within a single institution.

In the study I led with S. Mignot-Gérard in French universities (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 2006), it was for instance striking to see the many variations to be observed. It would be too long here to describe them in details but let me just point at some aspects. We for instance observed that teachers in hard sciences were quite resistant to large curricula for the bachelor

cycle and were strongly in favour of an early specialisation into a discipline. In the same vein, they were quite reluctant to the multiplication of optional classes. By contrast, in humanities and social sciences, multidisciplinary courses were frequent and many optional classes were proposed to the students<sup>5</sup>. At the master level this difference among these two families of disciplines vanished but all kind of solutions could be found. Some opted for the “Y form”<sup>6</sup> which was favoured by the ministry (specialisation begins in master 2), others for the “V form” (specialisation during the master 1), and some implemented “tubes” (specialisation when entering the master).

This limited national example shows that the curricula issue is far from being closed and that diversity and variety prevail within the “harmonized” cycles.

But it is certainly not sufficient to look at the curricula in these terms and one should go deeper into the deep-core of the disciplines in order to look at whether the changes in the study structure modified what is taught, how it is taught, what is expected from the student, or even affected the conceptions the members of a discipline have of their field. In a fascinating research led on British, French and Norwegian historians for her PhD, Marte Mangset (2008) for instance shows that the reforms of the master by the beginning of the 1990s in the United Kingdom on the one hand, and the implementation of the Bologna process in France and Norway on the other, affected the way by which students were trained in history within the three countries. In Norway for instance, the reduction of the formal length of the study to five years, and the incentives introduced in order to lead the teachers to respect this formal length obliged the Norwegian historians to reconsider the graduate programmes. First, in order to implement the ECTS, they had to provide more classes during the master 1. But they also had to adapt their expectations for the master thesis as their students have at least one year less to write it. This is highly criticized by those academics who say that this is in contradiction with the core characteristics of historical research which needs time, digging into the archives, being original and not only reproducing what has already be written, etc. They feel like they could no more transmit what historical research “really” is.

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<sup>5</sup> Some exceptions to this trend appeared in the case of disciplines in humanities and social sciences having no problem to recruit students. Those confronted with shortage of students on the contrary offered many optional classes in order to maintain their teaching load at the same level.

<sup>6</sup> The letters Y and V are used in France to qualify these various forms of masters. The Y form is the one the ministry tried to impose. But in some case, even if the project agreed upon by the ministry looked like a “Y form” the way it was concretely implemented could be closer to the “V form” or to the “tubes” (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin, 2006).

Looking at the impact of the Bologna process at this micro level and in the perspective of the sociology of knowledge as Marte Mangset is doing, is still rather rare as most studies focused on the national or institutional levels but there is also a lot to learn on the effect of the Bologna process on curricula if we look at the very content of training programmes.

### **3. The changing production system**

A further level to investigate more closely deals with the transformation affecting the production process of higher education training. The two-tiered structure also led to the generalisation of the semester-structure and to the modularisation of teaching. In its pure form<sup>7</sup>, each year should be organized in two semesters, each representing 30 ECTS distributed among various modules of courses.

In some cases, this transformed the teachers-training and the students-training relationships. This is the case in Germany for instance. Previously all training system was organized towards the fifth year final degree granting. The introduction of the two-tiered structure not only imposed the creation of bachelor degrees but also the organization of each semester in modules. According to some teachers with whom I recently interviewed, this had two major impacts. First it increased the number of exams for the students to pass (and for the teachers to organize and correct) because systems in which each module is linked to a specific exam now tended to be adopted. Second, it impacted the relationship between students and knowledge but between students and their studies. In the previous organisation, each seminar was not sanctioned by a specific exam and exams were conceived as a way to assess the capacity of the student to possess a certain domain of knowledge rather than a narrow part of it. Now each module bears a more instrumental goal: getting a grade to pass the semester. Some fear the broader and more ambitious intellectual objectives of higher education training would vanish.

The second effect of the transformation of the production process introduced by the two-tiered structure is close to the previous one, but not limited to countries which introduced a new

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<sup>7</sup> I called it pure form because many exceptions still exist. In France for instance some universities still refuse to abandon the annual structure of exams. The students who fail to the semester exams of February in these universities have to wait for the September overtake sessions to know whether they finally pass or not.

degree. It concerns the individualisation of the student trajectories. The modularisation, the development of optional classes, the potential mobility which can be led from one semester to another, the emphasis put on the construction of “made to order” path for each student are expected to impact on the relationships among the students themselves and on their socialisation to their university life.

A third impact of the introduction of the two-tiered structure deals with its consequence of the transformed system of production on academic work. In France for instance, the year was already organized in two semesters but the exams were organized on a yearly basis. Now, each semester finishes with a “final” exam which has to be passed by the students in order to be allowed to attend the next semester. It first increased the work load of the teachers: they for instance have to organise two overtake sessions instead of one in the previous system: one takes place at the end of the first semester and another at the end of the second. The time needed each semester for the exam session, the correction of the copies and the overtake session reduced the number of weeks during which classes can be given. In order to face this problem, some universities began their classes earlier in the year, thus reducing the time during which academics do not have teaching duties and may lead research activities.

## **Conclusion**

Two main conclusions have been developed in this paper. First I looked at the explanations which have been proposed in order to understand why the two-tiered structure proposed by the Bologna process led to more comparable but still not similar study structure in the signing countries, despite their overwhelming adoption of the two cycles.

But in a second time, I suggested that one should not limit the assessment of the new study structure to this first perspective and that its impact on the curricula on the one hand and on the training production process on the other should also be looked at. Two main conclusions can be drawn from this shift in focus.

First, the introduction of the two tiered structures is much more than a formal transformation. It impacted the content of the curricula and further investigations should be led on these effects. Moreover, the way it affected the training production system is modifying the

relationships of the students to their studies. We also miss research looking at this specifying aspect.

Second, these other levels of change seem to contribute to the diversity of the ways by which the bachelor / master scheme is implemented. European higher education systems are still far away from the convergence and standardization some expected from (but others feared about) the Bologna process.

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