

Europeanization of education*

Good morning to you all. I would like to thank the workshop organizers for inviting me to speak at this occasion.

My name is Marijke Keet, I'm a founding member of Professors without Borders and PhD student at the trilingual faculty of Computer Science, Libera Università di Bolzano / Freie Universität Bozen / Free University of Bozen-Bolzano in Italy.

Although many aspects of the EU education policies and system reforms are up for discussion and criticism, I will limit the scope of my talk to the theme 'Europeanization of education' – where the title at least resonates positively: Europeanization carries with it the original shared goals of the European project to create cooperation and interdependencies between peoples as a means to prevent war and build a lasting positive peace. Within the context of education, exactly thirty years ago the track-four diplomacy of citizen-to-citizen exchange programmes commenced to enable students to travel and study abroad at another university. This was, and still is, intended to let students experience other settings, cultures, etc as an integral aspect of university education for students to develop into responsible adult citizens, fostering respect and understanding for diversity. The ideals I share, but its realization through policies and reality are quite different things altogether.

In fact, the main policy programme to improve and stimulate exchanges is the Bologna Process – *not* the Lisbon Strategy. Looking at the Bologna Declaration, the ideals still resonate, such as the “Europe of knowledge ... social and human growth as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship”, but the 6 objectives are already somewhat limited. I focus on three here.

A. “easily readable and comparable degrees”: that is surely useful for the administration office, but all important for students themselves? In addition, the *comparable* degrees point had to fit with the Anglo-Saxon education system – which is pragmatic-oriented, not theoretical – and has resulted in, for instance, the Netherlands that colleges can now call themselves Universities – without any significant change in content of the education

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programme, let alone minding about the link between university education and research, which makes a *university* education (well, ‘old-style’ university education) distinct from vocational training and pragmatic oriented education that is targeted to match medium-level industry and public administration type of jobs. The notion of ‘teaching university’ is a *contradictio in terminis*.

B. Second, the “two main cycles”, where the emphasis is on BSc-MSc as the two cycles. It was only the Berlin Communiqué in 2003 that added the doctorate degree as a cycle. So, where in the vast majority of European countries there *used to be* a system of ‘MSc and then work/PhD’, the intention of Bologna has been to *trim it down* to ‘BSc and then afterwards’, as if building a knowledge society of well-educated citizens will be achieved by *reducing* the amount of education a student can enjoy. The follow-up Bergen Communiqué of 2005 even admits there are serious problems with the drop-out rate upon obtaining the BSc – a drop-out point in the educational career that has been created artificially.

So, these two aspects leaves an undergrad with less – insufficient – time to learn foundations of the discipline and to acquire necessary depth and transferable skills to get by in the job market; not just getting in there with performing ad hoc tricks, but being able to stay there, which requires knowledge of some theory and methodologies that are not dependent on ad hoc latest-fad techniques. Basic degrees used to be nominally 4-5 years *for good reasons*. Lisbon added and emphasised the market-driven component in 2000, *before* the Prague Communiqué in 2001 realised there are actually students whose future is put at stake by the present education system reform. Some policy priority there: the economy more important than the education of your citizens?! Furthermore, what the job market needs today, it may not need in the morrow. Cutting degrees because they are not fashionable is short-sighted and does not contribute to “vitality and efficiency of a civilization”. At Neumont University in the US, you can do a BSc in Microsoft and/or in IBM – what about adding degrees like ‘specialisation in Monsanto technologies’ or ‘Unilever nutrition’? I surely hope the European Higher Education landscape is *not* going to be like that. Knowledge and ideas from diverse disciplines are the *foundations* for applications and technologies, but unfortunately Lisbon takes this approach backwards (at best).

C. A third item in the Bologna Process is “Quality”, measured by some odd so-called quality measures. Bergen mentions peer review of the degree programmes, but a course description doesn’t tell you anything about what is actually being taught and how. What

interferes here is the ‘number crunching’: for instance, the higher the percentage of students who get their degree on time, the better – no matter how they got it. Course exercises that return in the exam, exam questions informally given beforehand – that makes it easier to speed up pushing the student through the system, but he or she doesn’t learn much from it, although it makes the university statistics look good.

More statistics, Lisbon press release: “With only 21% of the EU’s working-age population attaining tertiary education, the EU does not compare well with the US (38%), Canada (43%) or Japan (36%)”. To make the numbers look better, the Bologna Declaration idea of ensuring access of “*qualified students*” has been watered down in Bergen to “equally accessible to *all*”. It’ll do great wonders for the percentage if everybody goes to the university, but together with the graduation percentage, this implies a simplification of the education and a devaluation of the degree. Moreover, education budgets in European countries hardly increase, and in Italy it has even been reduced in percentage of GDP. An equal amount, or less, resources to educate more students, be it lecturer:student ratio or lab equipment, causes a further deterioration of the quality – but the statistics may look good to some.

Although the underlying original idea of Europeanization of education is a good, and lofty, goal, there are serious drawbacks in the implementation to facilitate its realization.

1. the Bologna Process is ending up to implement the lowest common denominator of education in Europe instead of making structural changes for developing a knowledge-based society
2. harmonization toward a BSc-emphasis – and even adding all sorts of vocational training at so-called universities – leads to creating, what is called in Dutch “Eenheidsworst”. In polite English this translates to ‘boring conformity’, but the literal translation of ‘unifying sausage’ to press students through a rigid, industry-oriented education system captures the meaning better. Society is *not* served by the myopic policies to drill students in the shortest amount of time for them to be only of short-term value to industry.
3. European education worsens due to lack of proper quality assessment, regarding the paperwork, ECTS bean counting, student statistics, and reduction of the actual content of the courses.
4. Students lose out on amount of education due to the 3+2 separation of the education programmes.

Policy makers and implementers in fact ignore a) the *education* component of the Bologna Process and b) the Europeanization aspect of it. It should be possible for a student to have choices like 'I'd prefer a pragmatic study programme' and goes to the UK or a college, study a theory-oriented programme in France, a PhD for a job in industry in Germany and for a career in research in Italy. Or, say, mathematics in the Netherlands, music and literature in Ireland, learn Russian in Russia. In short, for the student to choose the education system that suits him or her best. This is a *student-centred* approach that is *learning-enabling* instead of the administration-focus; one that caters for diversity necessary for a healthy functioning society, and allows the abroad-experiences, integration, and mutual understanding and respect to indeed create a Europe of Knowledge as the Bologna Declaration had formulated. It would be a real shame if the name of the oldest European university becomes also linked to marking the deterioration, or even the end, of a university system that has been built up over centuries.

Thank you.