

International BEST Symposium Report

“The Bologna process, Quality and Accreditation towards Recognition”

IBS Almada

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Abstract

An International BEST Symposium (IBS) is a forum in which students from all over Europe can meet for one week, and state their opinions on hot topics of education during roundtable discussions. The outcomes of the working groups will be brought to the decision-makers, so that they will get a possibility of hearing the students' point of view before changing the concept of education.

At this IBS the participants consisted of 17 students from 11 different European countries. All in different stages of their studies from freshmen's to PhD's.

The topic of the IBS was the Bologna Process, with a special focus on "the Diploma Supplement" and "Accreditation and Recognition" (both topics will be explained later, under the introduction for the working sessions).

During the IBS the discussions was held in two groups both facilitated by EduCo members, and notes were taken by EduCo members as well. The working session concerning "Accreditation and Recognition" was given valuable input by professor Jorge Lampreia. The participants were ensured to have sufficient background knowledge to participate actively in the discussions by reading the pre-materials provided by EduCo and by participating in the opening session where seven professors stated their point of view on the Bologna Process.

The professors present at the opening session where:

Leopoldo J. M. Guimarães, Rector of the "Universidade Nova de Lisboa"

Mário Vieira de Carvalho, Vice rector of the "Universidade Nova de Lisboa"

Luís Monteiro, Vice-dean at the "Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia" of the "Universidade Nova de Lisboa"

Jorge Lampreia, professor at the "Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia" of the "Universidade Nova de Lisboa"

José Manuel Torres Farinha, coordinator professor at the "College of engineering of polytechnic Institute of Coimbra"

Pedro Manuel Gonçalves Lourtie, professor at the "Instituto Superior Técnico" and one of the signatories of the Bologna Process on behalf of Portugal

Alberto Amaral, professor at the "University of Porto" and councillor of the ministry of Higher Education in Portugal

The Vice President of BEST for Educational Policies João Rei gave a presentation on the importance of student involvement on the development of engineering education in Europe.

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Introduction - The Diploma Supplement

What is the Diploma Supplement?

The basics behind the Diploma Supplement are that it will work as a supplement to the diploma that one will receive when graduating. This means that it will not in any way be a part of one's diploma. The Diploma Supplement will cite what courses one has participated in, what subject they included, teaching and examination method, the level of the courses etc. It will not include any information like the grade given for the course, for this information one must still use the diploma.

The Diploma Supplement should help making the different educations and courses more transparent. It aims to make recognition and accreditation between the universities easier. It is important to notice that the Diploma Supplement does not guarantee that a university will recognize courses taken at another university. It will only make it easier for the university to understand the background of a student and then hopefully make it easier to get the courses of the student recognised.

The Discussion

In the beginning of the discussion group additional papers concerning the Diploma Supplement and its content were handed out to read. The group then discussed whether the Diploma Supplement was the right approach to the problems of transparency among the universities, what problems there could be and how to improve it.

Working group 1

In working group 1 different questions were provided for the group to discuss upon. In the following sections the most important aspects will be shown.

What is the primary use of the Diploma Supplement?

- It should be a tool one can use after having been abroad, so when one goes back to the home university one can easily get courses recognised
- It should also make it easier to change university between cycles if one wants to take a master or PhD at another university.

What is the size of the Diploma Supplement, and what effects will that have?

- For every course to be described sufficiently, in order to give a realistic impression of the content of the course, the Diploma Supplement must be huge. Since all the descriptions would be quite detailed.
- Companies will not want to read 200 pages about someone's education. They may be interested in one or two courses if these qualifications are needed for the job.
- The Diploma Supplement would be relevant so that the universities gain transparency.

What kind of courses should be included on the Diploma Supplement?

- All engineering courses
- Maybe extra curricular activities like BEST or orchestra involvement should be there too, since extra curricula are very important when applying for a job.
- All courses that one gets points for, some educations have mandatory economics courses that you have to pass. So they should be described too.

In what languages should the Diploma Supplement be printed?

- All languages, so that people can apply for a job or to any university. In some countries English is hardly used, so maybe English is not always the best option.
- Only in English and the national languages, since it would be very expensive and a lot of work for the university to provide the Diploma Supplements in many languages. So if one wants the Diploma Supplement in another language, one must pay for it. It's a possibility to make an office somewhere in Europe specialised in translating Diploma Supplements, and then they can make the desired translation fairly cheap and officially.

Should all universities have the same template for the Diploma Supplement?

- In principle no, but it would make it very difficult for the university to get an overview of the Diploma Supplement if it was different from university to university.

The Result

- A complete Diploma Supplement would be very long, reminding of a book. The size would make it less useful when applying for a job, thus the employer would not have time to read all the pages. It could though be useful in the way of giving specific pages to the employer in order to prove certain skills.
- One of the big questions is the language; the general opinion is that the Diploma Supplement should only be issued in English and the national languages of the university. If needed in any other languages, the student should pay for the translation on his/her own.
- The model proposed for the Diploma Supplement is in generally okay; smaller changes could be needed.
- The Diploma Supplement is a good idea.

Working group 2

The subject of the Diploma Supplement was analysed in a very active and motivated working group. The analysis is considered thorough since it covered many aspects of this 'hot' topic. It started from the four needs that the Diploma Supplement is expected to carry out. These needs are:

- It promotes transparency in higher education.
- It accommodates rapid changes in qualifications.
- It aids mobility, access and lifelong learning.
- It promotes fair and informed judgments about qualifications.

The study and analysis of the Diploma Supplement started from these four purposes. The first purpose states that it enables the transparency among the universities, the second that it can describe easily even the slightest evolution in the academic field, the third that the Diploma Supplement facilitates the mobility of students and enhances the lifelong learning education, and the final one that it improves the fair employability of the holders of the degree.

The group agreed that the first three goals are achieved very well. However, they pointed out that the last purpose is definitely not fulfilled. The participants agreed that employability depends on the qualifications of the employee and the employment status of the market, and that the Diploma Supplement cannot affect or alter any of them.

There was a vivid discussion over the various 'technical issues' of the Diploma Supplement. It was underlined that the Diploma Supplement should be flexible, in order not to create an obstacle of any kind to the students and to the universities that are going to use it.

The first important issue that was pointed out is the necessity of having the Diploma Supplement accessible for the students in the same way as the Degree itself. Since the Diploma Supplement is mandatory for the students, it should be given to them without an extra charge; the participants insisted that no "extra charge or fee" should be applied to it. The students should have the right to have the Diploma Supplement in two languages, without any special proceedings towards and from the university. It was agreed that the two languages for the Diploma Supplement should be the official language of the university and the English language.

Later issues cover the participants' opinions over the content of the Diploma Supplement. Since, the Diploma Supplement offers to the students "A precise description of their academic courses and on the competencies acquired during the study period", the participants stated that the Diploma Supplement should be issued to the students after any change of institution (even if the studies do not last for a full degree, but only for a semester) so that the students always have the most current and accurate description of their studies and their qualifications.

However, in the group it was specified that the Diploma Supplement must only include and describe qualifications achieved during the studies at the university, and should be issued by the relevant Institution of Higher Education. The industry should not be a 'part' of the Diploma Supplement. All the professional experience should be given to the employees (even student employees) in a different way than the Diploma Supplement.

Far more interesting were the outcomes of the discussion considering the enormous topic of the Quality of Studies and the Quality Assurance System of the Universities. The participants seemed to be very aware that today's system does not give any guarantees about any kind of quality. The outcome of these questionings was that there is a need for an inter-European control over the various Higher Education Institutes in Europe. The participants used the term 'inter-European co-ordinator' for this authority but they did not give any comments over the implementation of such an authority.

Furthermore, it was pointed out that the Diploma Supplement is not able to give anything to the above issue. However, this is not a purpose of the Diploma Supplement. In other words, it is unable to build any kind of guarantees for the required quality of education in the European academic institutions. Moreover it is not going to take away the lack of trust that exists between some European institutions. However, this problem is expected to be solved with a fair Quality Assurance System.

Last, there was a lively discussion over the documentation of the Quality Assurance System data of a specific institution in the Diploma Supplement. It was clear that even though everyone recognises the need of a well-established Quality Assurance System, in the end the results/outcomes of it should not be documented in the Diploma Supplement. The main reason is that there is no need to complicate the work of both the Higher Education Institutions and the Quality Assurance System authority. It is obvious that the results of the latest authority-committee have to be available to the public, but certainly not through the Diploma Supplement, which was created for different purposes.

The Result

- The group believes that the Diploma Supplement cannot promote fairness in the employability of the holders of the degree.
- The Diploma Supplement must be available to the students in the same way as the Degree.
- The Diploma Supplement must be available in two languages without endorsing the students. Those two languages should be the official language of the university and English.
- During mobility, each part of the Diploma Supplement should be attested from the Higher Institution where the courses and other activities took place.
- A 'distance' is desired between the Diploma Supplement and the industrial world. Only the Higher Institutions should provide it.
- The Diploma Supplement is incapable of improving or giving any guarantees over the Quality of Studies.
- The Diploma Supplement should not contain any information relevant to the Quality Assurance System.

Conclusions of session 1

The two groups agreed on a lot of things. One of them was that the Diploma Supplement should be given in English and the official language of the university. Another thing was that the Diploma should be easily accessible, but that it would be very long and therefore not so relevant when contacting companies. Both groups thought that the Diploma Supplement was a good idea.

Introduction - Accreditation and Recognition"

The concept of accreditation and recognition has been around for just as long time as the actual Bologna Process and is one of the key elements within the Bologna Process. The idea is that after a student have studied at another University, he/she is then able to go back to his home university and has not only his/her courses recognized, but also his/her credit points included in his/her degree. A special credit system was made for this purpose. It is called the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and this system should now be implemented all over Europe and improve the mobility of students. But is this in fact the case? Furthermore this year universities all over Europe should have converted their system to a 3 + 2 cycle meaning that the master degree would be spilt into two-cycles, so one can take the first cycle at his/her home university. After that, have it recognized at another university and then take the last cycle there. How is this implementation going in Europe?

The Discussion

In general, for this session and for both working groups, the discussed topics were very wide, which could easily make the discussion felt unstructured and difficult to follow, since a lot of different aspects were discussed at the same time.

Working group 1

This session started with a presentation of the students presenting themselves and the status of the Bologna Process in their home university. It became clear that implementing the Bologna Process all over Europe was not going as fast as one might have hoped. In some countries like Denmark and Belgium the Bologna Process was fully implemented, the ECTS system was used as the normal way of giving points and the 3 + 2 cycle system was now fully implemented. In other countries the progress is moving ahead, but the Bologna Process is not yet fully implemented. Some of them used the ECTS system, but did not have the 3 + 2 cycle yet; others had it the other way around. And still there were countries with completely different systems like the Czech Republic where they are using a 3 + 2 + 3 system, here mobility between universities is almost impossible, since one cannot a get courses recognized. One of the main problems with the Bologna Process was that many of the universities could not agree upon the cycle system. Either because they were happy with the system they already had or because they believed that another system would be better. The three common systems are: 3 + 2, 4 + 1 or 5 + 0. In general one of the biggest problems is that not all universities have the same criteria for what it takes to become an engineer. So in order to make the implementation of the Bologna Process possible, a common set of criteria should be set.

After the presentation, the group discussed what could be done in order to improve recognition and accreditation. In the following paragraphs some of the points brought up will be explained.

One of the ideas discussed was the "Pilot idea". When one is being educated as a pilot, one will be given the same education no matter what country the person belongs to. The general opinion was that this in principle could work in engineering education, since the laws of physics are the same all over the world. However due to the problems of implementing the Bologna Process, making such radical changes as the "pilot idea" suggest, seems impossible.

Another topic discussed was the problem of having a permanent cycle system where you have to take specific courses in order to graduate. However, if this is the case then leaving the university for six months to be an Erasmus student could be done very difficult, since the courses given by the new university most likely would not apply to the list of courses given by the home university. This problem could be avoided by implementing some optional courses in the cycle system and when going aboard as Erasmus student one can use the optional points.

A known problem when going abroad is the problem of getting the points one has taken recognised by the home university, especially if one wishes to make a course merit transferred in order not to take the same course again when getting back. One of the options discussed was when one wants to get the course recognised one could take a "make up" exam at the home university proving that the course gave a significant insight to the subject. This could also be avoided by implementing the Diploma Supplement, in that way the university could easily see if the courses are the same. In general the best way of ensuring this, is by improving communication between universities and thereby ensuring a greater trust.

The Result

- Different progress according to Bologna Process in different countries, some countries need to catch up.
- In order to improve the accreditation problem, better communication is needed between the Universities.
- In order to make mobility easier the 3 + 2 system should be implemented.
- Criteria for engineers needs to be determined
- In a long-term perspective: Agreements and/or legislation on a European level are needed in order to increase mobility.
- Implementing the Diploma Supplement or using “make up” exams would make it easier to get the universities to trust one another.

Working group 2

The discussion started with the judgement of the new two-cycle system in education. There were some questions whether the new system is going to be applicable in all engineering studies. It is important to note that it was agreed that the engineering studies are not special in this subject compared with other fields of study.

Many participants had a strong point of view on whether the new two-cycle system should be 3+2 years, or 4+1 years. Most of the European countries are in favour of the 3+2 system. However, some of them, e.g. Portugal, will most likely introduce a 4+1 system, and this will definitely cause incompatibilities and difficulties in the mobility of students among the European universities. Obviously, the students that hold a Bachelor degree from a 3+2 system will have difficulties being mobile and enrolling in an institute that is using the 4+1 system. This way, they will have a disadvantage compared to the other students and this would not be fair. There are high expectations that in the end all the countries will have to follow the 3+2 model, but this will come after some years.

The second important issue was the diversity of education in the European countries. Everyone agreed that even though it is a big effort to make education uniform throughout the continent, there are still some differences among the various countries. This diversity arises mostly from social and economic differences that are distinct among the European countries. The conclusion, however, is that diversity exists and it will continue existing, since Europe is not fully uniform.

The subject of accreditation and recognition followed in the discussion. The part of academic accreditation and recognition was a difficult one, since it was pointed out that so far the accreditation depends only on the information that the Higher Education Institutes share for each other. Fortunately, there are some mechanisms that will improve the situation, like the Diploma Supplement or a thorough Quality Assurance System. However, some participants were worried for the fairness of such mechanisms that sometimes put their degrees into contestation.

On the other hand, professional recognition was encountered more easily from the participants. Official institutions or bureaus that are responsible for professional recognition exist in every country. All the participants talked about the national institutions of their home countries. They agreed that usually professional recognition is not such a problem, since the market (the employers) is the one that takes the decision of employing an engineer. However, it was pointed out that some of the professions are strictly accredited and recognised from a national institute, because they are considered crucial for the public health and insurance. Examples of regulated professions are the profession of the doctor, the nurse, the dentist and the architect. The latest one is the most important for the engineering education.

The last ‘hot’ topic that was discussed was the cost of the Higher Education. It was obvious that it is rather high and the main question was whether the education should be free for the public or not. The situation in every home country of the participants was discussed and it was made clear that in some countries education is free. This is all due to the variation in the social and educational status of these countries. There was some concern for future; many participants expressed their concern for fees or for higher fees. Generally, it is believed that the first cycle of studies will be ‘cheaper’ than the second cycle of studies and so on but still, none of the participants was in favour of fees in Higher Education.

Finally, it is essential to point out that a big part of the conversation was concerning the status in Portugal. Professor Jorge Lampreia of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa had a lot of information to share about his home country and this led to the very good picture of this European country.

The Result

- A uniform cycle system of studies is absolutely necessary to enhance the mobility of students in European Higher Institutions. We note that mobility requires academic accreditation of the studies in a university abroad.
- Academic accreditation and recognition are still in a primitive form.
- Professional recognition system is well established in a national level but there is no inter-European coordination for it. Moreover, there are similarities among the various national professional recognition systems.

Conclusions of Session 2

By combining the main outcomes of the discussions it is clear that in order to make recognition and accreditation possible, one common system should be implemented, most likely the 3 + 2 system. But at the moment there is still a long way to go. There are different ways of improving mobility with some of the ideas mentioned, like the “make up” exams or the implementation of the Diploma Supplement.