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Students’ Enactment of the Bologna Process
Chair: Lars Ulriksen (University of Copenhagen)
Discussant: Christine Teelken (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Twenty years of the Bologna process has had profound effect on the national higher-education systems, although the changes have been linked with national reform agendas, and the implementation of the reform elements varies between nations (Broucker et al., 2019). The Bologna process has indeed been researched (cf., Wihlborg and Teelken, 2014), but there appear to have been little focus on what Ball (1993) calls the policy as text, that is, the ‘not always linear and rational’ enactment (Ball, 2015: 309) of the Bologna reform by students and teachers. The Bologna process and the concomitant reforms have contributed to the production of assumptions about how students should act as students within the European Higher Education area. However, Ball points out that ‘policies are “contested”, mediated and differentially represented by different actors in different contexts (“policy as text”)’ (Ball, 2015: 311). This also goes for the Bologna reforms.

A significant change following the Bologna process was the introduction of the 3+2+3 structure. In some countries, this introduced a new degree at university and presented the students with an additional choice to make concerning which trajectory to follow beyond the bachelor degree.

Students’ decisions concerning choice of higher education after high school has been extensively researched. In the process of choosing which higher-education programme to enter, students balance different elements, including who they might become if entering one programme or the other, what possible future work life a particular study could lead to and what is considered legitimate in the social environment of the students (Bøe et al., 2011; Holmegaard, 2015). In the transition, many students experience a gap between what they expect and what they meet (Holmegaard et al., 2014). Similar research addressing the choice and transition beyond the bachelor degree does not exist, but presumably this transition also involves students reflecting about what possible futures the study programmes may offer and expectations about what the Master’s programme entails.

Looking at the transition patterns at a macro level, it appears that the discourse of increased mobility of students due to the 3+2 structure has limited resonance in the actual trajectories of students although some changes in the patterns can be found. Those changes in trajectories, however, appear to counteract another ambition of the Bologna process, namely that of the social dimension. The decision and transition point at the end of the bachelor level offers an opportunity for the more privileged students to opt into more prestigious study trajectories. Hence, the enactment of the reform at a macro level suggests a dilemma concerning the objectives of the Bologna process as a whole.

At the micro level of the students, what appears to be limited movements between fields of study in the transition is for the individual student the result of a process of extensive reflections and concerns. The students’ enactment of the reform shows that although the outcome appears to be that students in general continue along the same trajectory, the experienced enactment is more complex and causes more doubts and uncertainties than the quantitative patterns suggest.

This symposium contributes to filling two gaps in research on the Bologna process. First, it adds to our understanding of how students at a macro level have enacted the reforms. Secondly, it offers an understanding of the complexity of students’ dealing with the structural conditions and requirements in post-Bologna higher education, the policy as text. The symposium presents two qualitative and two quantitative studies of data from four European countries: Denmark, Germany, Italy and Norway. The four contributions each explores the enactment of the Bologna process by European higher-education students.

References


Presentations of the Symposium
Papers in Symposium: 4
National Perspectives: 4

Social Inequality at The Transition from Bachelor to Master Degrees in Germany: Empirical Evidence for Five Graduate Cohorts

David Reimer (Aarhus University), Ulrike Schwabe (DZHW (German Centre for Higher Education and Science Studies))
National perspective: Germany
Implementing the goals of the Bologna-Reforms was controversially discussed in Germany, because introducing a consecutive degree structure, as one among others, resulted in a new transition stage after the completion of the Bachelor degree (Brändle 2010, Vögtle 2019). While some of the formulated goals were met, previous studies focusing on that “new transition” have demonstrated that the goal to reduce inequalities in participation has had no - or only limited success. A considerable amount of students from disadvantaged backgrounds that achieved a long-cycle degree in the pre-Bologna system, now leave higher education already after the completion of the bachelor degree (Lörz et al. 2015, Neugebauer et al. 2016). Therefore, the aim of this paper is twofold: The first objective (i) is to provide a systematic review of the empirical literature studying the "social dimension" of the Bologna reforms in Germany. The second objective (ii) is to provide an in-depth analysis of the transition from Bachelor to Master programs over time. Drawing on data from recent large-scale DZHW graduate surveys (graduate cohorts of 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017), we replicate previous studies and analyze levels of social inequality at the transition from Bachelor to Master. Hence, we go beyond previous work by analyzing the occurrence of "horizontal transitions" - focusing on mobility between universities and universities of applied sciences. We are able to replicate previous findings that show that there are considerably social background at the transition from Bachelor to Master degree for all graduate cohorts (Kretschmann et al. 2017, Lörz et al. 2015, Neugebauer et al. 2016). But, social stratification and mobility patterns changed within the time period of nearly two decades. Therefore, our study contributes to the existing literature by explicitly taking this development over time into account. With respect to the "social dimension" within the Bologna-Process empirical evidence indicates that this goal is far from being obtained for the German case. Finally, we critically discuss our findings comprehensively taking a broader perspective.

References:


Science Students’ Post-Bachelor Choice Narratives

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National perspective: Denmark

The intention with the Bologna declaration in European higher education was to ensure that each country was left with autonomy to implement the policy at national level. However the standardization processes have clearly governed national policy (Bregger, Bregger, & Janssen, 2019). In this paper, we critically reflect on how this interact with higher education practice and, more specifically, Danish students’ choices and thoughts about their future. The aim is to investigate students’ post bachelor choices by analysing: • The narrative repertoires available within selected study programmes • How students’ within these programmes construct their choices in relation to these Three bachelor programmes were selected at the University of Copenhagen: Computer Science, Natural Resources and Chemistry – all within the Faculty of Science, but different in terms of post-bachelor possibilities. Register-data on the total population of bachelor students at the selected study programmes were analysed to detect students’ post-bachelor trajectories. Workshops with 15-20 students at each programme were carried out where the students engaged in various qualitative activities: Writing an essay, brainstorming individually and in groups about possible post-bachelor opportunities, and making drawings of their future selves. 18 students were selected for timeline interviews (Adriansen, 2012). Applying the notion of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), we explore students’ narrative repertoires made available through the study culture (Hasse, 2002) and the negotiation process the students go through (Holmegaard, Madsen, & Ulrikens, 2014) when deciding what to do after completing a Bachelor degree. This is a process of identity formation (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) where students work on constructing choice-narratives, that on the one hand are available and recognizable within their studies, and, on the other hand, something they can relate to themselves and their desirable futures (Holmegaard, 2015). Register data shows that students from the selected programmes display limited mobility and the vast majority of students continue into a master programme related to their degree. This is however in contrast to the qualitative results. Here, the analysis shows how the students negotiate their post-bachelor choice in relation to a wide range of dimensions related to past experiences, study culture, family and future aspirations in their effort to construct a viable choice narrative. The discussion addresses how on the one hand the Bologna declaration has not led to changes in Danish students’ post-bachelor trajectories, while, on the other hand, it has had an influence on student practices, desires and aspirations.

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Development of The Bologna Process in Italy

Giuseppe Pellegri (Università di Trento)

National perspective: Italy

Italy has joined the Bologna process since 1999. Since the end of the nineties, a system of autonomy and evaluation of universities has developed in Italy which, to a certain extent, has triggered some competition in a quasi-market landscape by highlighting many differences between areas of the country. Considering four key variables: drop out, student motivations, social class and mobility, official statistics show that the Bologna process contributed to the development of specific trends. There has been a clear trend towards a lowering of drop-out rates. This is probably due to a reduction of master courses and students enrolled in universities. There is also a lack of disciplinary mobility probably due to the fact that students tend to confirm the choice made in the BA step. Social class still affects students’ careers and the different opportunities offered by the University in different geographical areas lead to greater mobility, particularly from the south to the north of the country. This means that the expectation of reducing inequalities between various areas of the country has not been met and various universities in the south have not been able to offer a quality offer with master courses. The Bologna process has contributed to a lesser extent to open up spaces for inclusion and better education for students in Italy. However, there are still some areas to be developed to encourage full participation of young people in the education process. So, it is possible to say that the process of student transition also marks the process of institutional change that the Bologna process has produced in the Higher Education system.
The Importance of Structural Factors: A Comparison of BA to MA Transitions in Denmark and Norway

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National perspective: Norway, Denmark

Before the Bologna process, Danish and Norwegian universities offered mainly one-degree programmes. The Bologna two-cycle structure changed this, and now students must decide and apply to enter a MA programme after completing BA. An important difference between the two similar systems that could affect the transition from BA to MA is that Danish students who have completed a BA programme are entitled to admission in the adjoin MA programme. This is not the case in Norway. Drawing on theories of transitions, identity and life course (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010; Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014), the paper analyses the students’ reflections and decisions concerning continued studying beyond BA level, particularly how structural factors were important when making their choice. Building on statistical data accompanied by focus-group interview data with students in humanities at one Danish and one Norwegian institution, this article investigates the transition process from BA to MA. Preliminary analyses indicate that students view the transition to MA as a natural continuation of a BA rather than an actual choice. At the same time, deciding which MA programme to enter requires the students’ reflections. Some of the Norwegian students expressed that getting an MA would improve their career prospects, implying that they are motivated by the reward of a holding a MA degree rather than a BA. The Danish students emphasised that it was important to consider which MA programme would genuinely meet their interests. They argued that postponing the decision to enter the MA programme could be relevant to reach the right decision. They also reported that they valued being familiar with the culture of the specific BA programme, but also that the status of the institution played a role. Hence, even though Danish students generally decide to continue in the adjoin programme this does not mean that the choice is given. This could suggest that the right to continue eventually make students inclined to perceive this as the right choice. That Norwegian students do not have this right could make their choice process more open. The study shows that the enactment of a common European framework varies in the practices of students, even between two similar national systems. This offers an insight into how the policy decisions of the Bologna process can be traced in the trajectories and practices of students in two similar, yet not identical European university systems.

References: