The Bologna Accord and New Students

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The background of the Bologna Accord is relevant to understanding its consequences, in terms of attracting new students for colleges and universities in Europe. Two relevant documents from the mid-90s were produced by the Conference of European Rectors (CER), currently integrated in the European Universities Association (EUA); one by its president Prof. Josep Bricall, and the other a report presided by Jacques Attali and published in 1998, called "Pour un modèle européen de l'enseignement supérieur."

Both reports suggested that the higher education system should consider a mixture of initial studies followed by education in the current perspective of lifelong learning. That meant they were proposing an initial cycle of studies that should be, in general, of short duration, with complimentary training and education according to personal and professional needs.

The French minister of education, Claude Allégre, during the 800th anniversary of the University of Sorbonne, presented the idea to the British, German and Italian ministers. The ministers then signed the Sorbonne Declaration in Paris on 25 May 1998. In fact, it was an agreement to establish short cycles and medium cycles in the four biggest countries in the European Union, so that validation and mobility could be facilitated. The Italian minister, Mr. Berlinguer, during his speech, convened the follow-up meeting for the University of Bologna and invited other countries to join. In fact that invitation was a success; on 19 June 1999, in Bologna, twenty-nine countries signed the Bologna declaration—a pledge with content similar to the Sorbonne declaration.

The recommendations of the Bologna declaration were implemented in different ways. For instance the European Commission took the opportunity of the document’s release to implement improvements that had been in the works for many years.

One such improvement is the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). It encourages the portability of education among countries and among universities. That was a major advance in the implementation of automatic control of quality between higher education systems.

Another improvement was the recognition of prior and informal learning, allowing the academic recognition of training and of education acquired outside the academic systems. These two favored opening up higher education system to other publics.

Of involved countries interpreted and followed the Bologna accord recommendations in many ways. Italy, which was keen to have alternatives to its model of higher education programs that are long and free of cost, created in 1999 the first short cycles in the country’s history. Other countries like Finland and Portugal that had already short cycles of studies were more reluctant to use Bologna recommendations. The majority of participating countries used the social opportunity created by the Bologna accord to implement reforms that had little to do with the original intentions.

In general, the Bologna declaration, or accord, allowed major transformations in higher education in several European countries, though in some cases was used just as an excuse. There is no doubt that there are evident consequences caused by the Bologna declaration: there are many students studying temporarily in other European countries; there is an easier recognition of qualifications; and there are more courses that provide initial and continuing education for people throughout Europe. The main goals of the Sorbonne and Bologna declarations can be considered accomplished—but only in part.

Socioeconomic realities of recent years have discouraged the majority of European students from leaving higher education at the end of their first cycle. The majority are staying for longer cycles of studies, hoping that a better qualification will facilitate the access to a better job.

Concerning continuing education, there were already recent initiatives, especially from the European Commission, that have helped the access to training and to education, especially
in the vocational area. It is also expected that with the reduction of public funding and the decrease of young students that higher education will need to dedicate more efforts to attracting adults. The tools and legal frameworks exist already and it is a question of strategic and tactical decisions from the universities and colleges.

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