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**When Can a Weak Process Generate Strong Results ?
Entrepreneurial Alliances in the Bologna Process to Create a
European Higher Education Area ***

by

Barbara G. Haskell**

Barbara.haskel@mcgill.ca

Political Science

McGill University, (retired)

Montreal, Canada

Abstract

This paper attempts to explain how an intergovernmental process among four countries to “harmonize” the “architecture” of their higher education systems in under ten years turned into an “OMC-type” process with a full role for the European Commission and a membership of forty-six countries, a system which appears to have had some substantial results. The paper argues that the speed of the process is accounted for by a “coordination imperative,” and that the sustainability (institutionalization) of the process has been a product of the initiatives for goals, instruments, support structures, and measurements generated by an “entrepreneurial alliance” composed of the Commission and the European Universities Association as “drivers” of the process and as solver of a collective action problem among social actors interested in university reform, in the context of a permissive consensus of the member states

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Within less than a decade one state's initiative to agree with three European counterparts upon joint principles to govern the reform of their individual university systems, a "common architecture," has become a highly elaborated OMC-type "process" with not only an extended number of goals, but also agreed instruments and measurements, and with forty-six European countries adhering! Although initiated as strictly intergovernmental, and outside the European Union, within three years the EU's Commission had been recognized as a "member" (i.e., not observer) of the process.

The professed aim of the effort was a "European Higher Education Area," where students and researchers could have their work recognized and therefore have access to the whole of Europe's higher education resources – by 2010. (Behind the initiative of the first few continental countries had been the wish to obtain legitimacy and allies for the internal reform of their own university systems, deemed ineffective and costly, as well as highly recalcitrant to change.) Recent reports assess that there is substantial implementation, even if it is highly uneven both within and between countries.

The major question of the paper is: how could such a weak process lead astonishingly fast to hard policy changes within states? In the language of this paper, what "modes of governance" were used? Two subsidiary issues are: what accounts for the rapidity with which this initiative spread, and how was it sustained and institutionalized? How did the European Commission become an integral, if not leading, part of the process? Does this case tell us anything about the conditions under which such governance is likely to be created and sustained?

My argument is that the Bologna process, a predominantly cooperative mode of governance (a necessity since it was voluntary), began as a strictly intergovernmental process but that this fast proved ineffective, creating an implicit "demand" for leadership. The Commission, which especially in the education area had had long experience with the constraints of the EU Treaty, worked together with the association representing European universities in crafting a catalytic and coordinative role (the policy and leadership "supply") – even though this process was not and is not formally an EU enterprise. Especially because of the "softness" of the governance process, a "driver" was necessary. Put another way, once the Commission/universities-association team became an institutionalized player, the whole "seemingly intergovernmental" process became sustainable (institutionalized). I account for the rapidity with which the number of member-states increased by what I call the "coordination imperative."

I. The surprisingly rapid spread of the European Higher Education Area

In 1998, the French Minister of Higher Education, Claude Allegre, using the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the founding of the Sorbonne, invited his counterparts in Germany, Italy and, as an afterthought, England to agree to a "Joint declaration on the harmonization of the architecture of the European higher education system."

The story has been recounted by several authors (Corbett 2005, Ravinet 2005, de Wit 2003, Naeve 2003, Keeling 2006). In 1999, at Bologna, the Ministers of twenty-nine countries signed the "Bologna Declaration," calling for the creation of a European Higher Education Area by 2010. The twenty-nine were members of the EU, the then ac-

cession states, and the three members of the European Economic Area. They established a process of biannual Ministerial meetings, with rotating venue, Chair, and Secretariat. These were prepared for by information circulation, meetings and workshops to compare information about their higher education systems. Six operational objectives or “action lines” were specified: 1.) Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, 2.) Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles, 3.) Establishment of a system of credits, 4.) Promotion of academic mobility, 5.) Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance, 6.) Promotion of a European dimension in higher education.

In the ensuing eight years the policy areas increased to ten, namely by adding: 7.) Lifelong learning, 8.) Involvement of higher education institutions and students as “active partners, 9.) Enhancement of the “attractiveness” of EHEA, and 10.) Doctoral studies as a third cycle and synergy between EHEA and ERA, the European Research Area. The Bologna strategy was melded with the larger (EU) Lisbon Strategy, and the number of participant states increased radically, to forty-six.

Institutionally, non-state and expert actors were made Observers, the key one being the European Universities Association (EUA). Others were its vocational education counterpart, EURASHE, and the National Unions of Students in Europe, ESIB, as well as international organizations long active in gathering information and offering policy prescriptions on education, the Council of Europe and the OECD. A crucial part of the process, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, BFUG, (the between-ministerial-meetings group and its steering committee) was institutionalized in 2001. At the same time, the European Commission was formally included as a member (i.e., not just an observer), both in Ministerial meetings and in BFUG. By 2003 the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) was a participant, as well as (only) one of the European level social partners, UNICE (the European Employers Federation). They and Education International (EI), a (worldwide) organization of academic trade unions (from pre-school to university) were brought in as “consultative members” of BFUG. This elaborate consultative and policy promoting process revolves around the biannual meetings of Education Ministers.¹

The reform which has been emblematic for Bologna is the three-year first degree plus two-year second degree (now complemented with a “notionally” three-four year third degree), all together three “cycles.” Note that this allows for a student to attend another university, even one in another country, for the second (or third) degrees. This replaces the continental template of a five-year first degree (from which there were many drop-outs, and under which those who completed it tended to do so in seven to eight years). The recent (2005, 2007) stocktaking studies concluded that the change had been adopted by “almost all signatory countries” in “almost all fields”

¹“The European Higher Education Area-Achieving the Goals,” Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, pp. 19-20 (May 2005), p. 1 (Bergen Communiqué). See latest official Bologna website <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bologna/>, which has a link to historical material put together on the Bergen website and lists BFUG meetings and BFUG-sponsored “seminars” which are structured to end in recommendations to the next Ministerial meeting.

(medicine excepted) and that there were fewer “structural barriers between cycles.” A credit system, ECTS, is in use in most countries and “most commonly” used both for credit transfer and credit accumulation. “Over half” the countries will provide a Diploma Supplement for all institutions and study programs. This document serves some of the purposes of a North American transcript, which had had no European equivalent. These comprise the original “mobility Bologna.” More demanding but for the same overarching purpose is the call for a “National Qualifications Framework,” “certified against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA.” The communiqué after the most recent (London) Ministerial meeting says “around ten countries” have committed themselves to this. Related is the Lisbon Recognition Convention (ratified by thirty-six of the forty-five Bologna countries by 2005) which shifts the burden of proof in any denial of recognition of qualifications to the institution denying them.

Reform within a university program was the introduction of “research training” (i.e., taught courses, in addition to the research requirement), for the Ph.D. “Virtually all” signatory countries either recommended or required this. And persistent pressure, presumably for effectiveness and efficiency (in teaching, in administration), is to be exerted through the institutionalization of “Quality Assurance” Agencies, independent of the educational authorities. The report said that “most” countries had this, (although nine of the forty-five had agencies that were not independent of the authorities). In 2005 European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) were adopted, and there has been pressure for a European “Register” of QA agencies, with the aim of allowing universities to choose among them. Progress on some of the more recently adopted objectives, like “lifelong learning” (now also a formal EU mandate to the Commission), cannot yet be assessed but look, in some Commission formulations, to subsume higher education, including universities (Reichert and Tauch 2005, Crozier 2007).²

Even if one qualifies the findings of the recent reports,³ and even if we understand that there are (and are bound to be), disparities in implementation and/or performance among institutions within states, still, by any measure, the movement within nine years has been remarkable.

II. An Explanation of the Pace: the Coordination Imperative

I am struck by the coordination aspect (Hardin 1995, Schelling 1971, Krasner 1991) of the early Bologna Process. Here, I believe, the fact that the “big four” countries agreed on something acted as a “critical mass” (to mix metaphors). The agreement of the four largest and most influential states gave strong incentives for others to join. Why? The only potential sanction was being “out” when many and/or important oth-

²For academic analyses at the halfway point, see: “The Bologna Process: a mid-term review” and “Le processus de Bologne à mi-parcours” in bibliography.

³The comparative reports on implementation are significant but difficult to interpret. The 2005 *Focus on the Structure of Higher Education in Europe 2004/05. National Trends in the Bologna Process*, warned that it was reporting data “on the intentions of policy-makers” (p. 5). The 2007 *Focus* used general quantitative terms such as “most.”

ers are “in,” that is, having your students’ education not “recognized” in what was to be a process importantly aimed at recognition by each other and by outsiders, recognition not only of individual students but of your universities, your “attractiveness” as an educational and scientific center. Being “out” would stymie your students’ and faculty members’ mobility in the new context, one in which, unlike the past, others would be mobile. Thus one significant incentive to join the dominant group, once it seems to have a good chance of being dominant, is not to be left out and, therefore, left behind. The prospect of competition under the new conditions created incentives to cooperate (in this case, to join).

The “two cycle,” “three-plus-two” pattern provided a focal point for the states (Garrett and Weingast 1991). At the time, different models were being thought about by the Ministers in France and Germany. Now the discussion was crystallized around a three-year “bachelors” and two-year “masters.”⁴ The “focal point” idea helps us understand the looseness with which the “three-plus-two” idea has been interpreted: first cycle, three-four years; second cycle, one-two years, *but* the two cycles together should not be more than five years. This permits the British three-year first degree *or* four-year (first) Honours degree plus a one-year Masters (Becker 2004). In this whole process, without overt sanctions, and with a desire to allow for national educational traditions, leeway is important and the question is the tolerability of the leeway for the objective of mutual recognition, within a roughly similar pattern.

The context of enlargement also makes the coordination argument plausible. Accession countries were eager to join “European” and “Western” arrangements. They wanted to be involved in all networks. Academically they wanted and needed recognition for their educational systems in the aftermath of ideological inheritances, and needed technical assistance to catch up. Some countries had great ancient universities with long and illustrious traditions, and they wanted recognition for that.

Of course coordination is only one dimension of this process. Countries could hardly be indifferent to the characteristics of the system with which they were to “coordinate” and for which they would be obliged to make (technically or politically) expensive changes. This does not, however, vitiate the point that there was in addition a coordination aspect – and in this case, it seems to have outweighed reservations about substance astonishingly quickly. An “education-specialist-diplomat-entrepreneur,” when asked how the smaller countries were brought along in the year between Sorbonne (four countries) and Bologna (twenty-nine countries), said that the argument was: “It’s going to happen”⁵ which, I would maintain, is exactly the argument likely to elicit the “if so, we had better be in” response, what I call the perceived “coordination imperative.”

⁴Ravinet (2005) argues that “coagulation” around the “three-plus-two” idea at the Sorbonne meeting, given its stability in later years, is like the famous QWERTY keyboard See David 1985. I would add that the QWERTY analogy warns that an early decision may or may not be best (most efficient). Bologna, for example, has run into problems with having graduates of three-year degrees accepted in many U.S. institutions.

⁵Interview, Dr. Guy Haug, Brussels, November 29, 2005 (hereafter, Haug interview).

III. The Incentives for States and Universities to Cooperate

For states, the consequences of the status quo had become very visible in an era of increased student mobility and worldwide scientific/economic competition. In many European countries (the templates are Germany and Italy), mass education had been superimposed on university structures which had changed little from the time of very small elite cohorts. This was not only straining resources, but was both cost-inefficient and cost-ineffective. Graduates were not clearly employable. In general, universities were extremely underfunded. The number of students going from Europe to North America and from Asia to North America far outnumbered those coming to Europe for higher education. When a Shanghai ranking of universities put European universities far down the scale, Europeans were shocked!

The exception was Britain, which attracted international students, for both academic and language reasons, and charged substantial foreign fees; higher education was one of Britain's "export industries." Others aspired to attract foreign students for scientific and industrial/economic, as well as for cultural, reasons.

Second, the role of knowledge in the economy focused attention upon research generation as a weapon in the "economic competitiveness" battle. Comparative information showed that national levels of funding for research in the U.S., Canada and Japan were far higher than those in (most of) Europe. In the U.S., a much greater proportion of the funding came from private, mostly industry, sources, and also from tuition. Connected with this, and with underfunded universities, was clearly the issue of attracting the best researchers and advanced students.

The European Union's Lisbon Agenda (2000), for example, had emphasized the role of knowledge in its diagnosis of the lagging economies of Europe. In its OECD/Lisbon supply-side diagnosis, the economic problems were seen as "structural," exacerbated, but not caused, by radically intensified global trade and investment competition. The new requirements were economic "restructuring" and increased "flexibility." The universal nostrums were: "education and training," investing in "human capital," "upskilling," "lifelong learning" for "employability." Science was seen as part and parcel of "innovation"; close ties between research and industry were to be promoted. Knowledge creation had become part of economic potential.

In this context Huisman and van der Wendt's observation that "the presumed lack of national governments' acceptance of international or supranational interference in higher education is not as deep as expected" is less surprising than it might be (Huisman and van der Wende 2004).

What were the incentives for universities? The Bologna process was, in important ways, a "bottom-up" process, although it seems impossible that anything like this could have taken off without the "top-down" agreement of the states. In what sense, if any, did it emerge from the universities?

First of all, symbolically, the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 was preceded by a decade by the "Magna Carta" of 1988, a statement by the Rectors of European universities. It stressed first the autonomy of the universities and the inseparability of research and

teaching. It called for encouragement of mobility of teachers and students, and policies of “equivalence” for diplomas. These important desiderata were picked up and operationalized a decade later at Bologna (1999). More significantly these Rectors and Universities in 2001 formed, out of two prior organizations, the EUA, the European Universities Association. It now claims to represent more than 750 universities. High up on its agenda was influencing the Bologna Process “through collective action,” and including the universities in the policy discussions on the ERA, the European Research Area. (EUA 2001-2005). In fact, EUA has met and produced declarations before each Ministerial meeting after Bologna; it sits on BFUG, the important follow-up group, and participates in the drafting of the Ministerial Communiqués; it publishes “responses” to Commission statements.

The Commission has contracted with EUA to produce, prior to each Ministerial meeting, the major biannual comparative descriptive report (published under the innocuous series title “Trends...”). The Commission and others make use of these in policy documents. One of the EUA’s principal specialists, long active in EUA (and before that in other, including American, higher educational organizations), someone who has been involved in all the Bologna meetings, has at other times been on contract to the Commission.⁶ Together with the striking policy consonance of the two organizations, this suggests a rather blurred line between the Commission and the universities organization, and more generally, in a pattern familiar to students of the EU, a rather blurred line between the Commission and expert groups, the establishment of several of which it has encouraged or which it helps sustain.

More broadly, one could fairly say that many of the key elements of Bologna – not necessarily the “three-plus-two” (plus three) model per se, but having several levels of university education with “bridges” between them; not necessarily ECTS and the DS, but some form of crediting system for work done elsewhere; not necessarily the specific form of Quality Assessment (QA) being evolved, but some form of independent assessment, and accountability based upon “learning outcomes” (rather than just “inputs”); some way of integrating nontraditional learning and vocational learning so that employers, universities, and foreign universities could “read” and “recognize” (or at least, evaluate) them—all these would be part of the accepted aims of specialists in education at every level. The educational “epistemic community”⁷ provided much of the mutually accepted information, as well as a similar diagnosis, and generally similar prescriptions. (Note that these diagnoses and prescriptions were aimed at and justified as what is effective and efficient for the individual student.)

The educational objectives of those international organizations which have long produced cross-national research on education – OECD, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe – are largely the same. They have been part of the creators of the epistemic understanding, and part of the “pre-history” of Bologna; they have been “reinforcing” regimes, contributing data, ideas and framing. They have participated in Bologna as “ob-

⁶Dr. Guy Haug. In 2005 the Commission itself had only a few people in its unit on Schools and Higher Education within DG Education and Culture, and only one other, as far as I could find out, who followed the Bologna process.

⁷On the concept of “epistemic community,” see Haas 1992.

servers" from the start. (The last two sponsored the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention (2000) which, much as "mutual recognition" had done for the single market within the EU, reversed the burden of proof in the recognition of academic credentials.) Michel Crochet, Rector of The University of Louvain, argues that academics, especially the Rectors, were "the motor" of change (Crochet 2004). Claude Allegre, the French Education Minister, was a scientist; Crochet, an engineer; scientists and engineers were particularly attuned to worldwide standards of excellence, to the consequences of low funding, to ties to the economy, to issues of the job market. Luigi Berlinguer, the Italian Minister of Higher Education in 1998, was a jurist, not a scientist (in the North American sense of the word), but had been the President of the Rectors' Conference in Italy. To adduce quite different evidence, when, in 2005, a Vice Rector at the Université Libre de Bruxelles was asked about the "reception" of Bologna changes in the university, he volunteered that it was "good for the managers."⁸ I would argue that what we see here is an "entrepreneurial" alliance between EUA, representing university administrations, and the Commission. This created drive ("leadership") as well as developed the policy and information which aided largely willing States' administrations. These State Ministries then, in de facto alliance with some Rector teams, instituted changes in the universities. It has been commented perceptively that what has resulted is a form of differentiated integration, but this time not a core-periphery model.⁹ Several of the "old" and "founding" states (Germany, Italy, France) "went to Europe" to get allies or legitimation for change; they were not the sources of models for diffusion to others. They were the source of "Demand" and the Commission-EUA the source of (policy) "Supply." Other countries responded largely to the "coordination imperative."

One of the striking things about the Bologna process is that, since the turn of the twenty-first century, the universities are organized in a Europe-wide body; so are the student unions; international organizations are present. Only university faculty qua professors/faculty members are unrepresented as so-called "stakeholders." Why? Is it because they are organized only by discipline or, in some countries, by trade unions? The sole organization in some fashion representing faculty members, and accorded Observer status at Bergen in 2005, was Education International, which is an organization of trade unions of teachers from pre-school to university, and from 160 countries, i.e., not limited to Europe. (It was they who commissioned the sole work I found on the reactions of faculty members, a survey called "The Role of Academics in the Bologna Process."¹⁰)

⁸Interview, Brussels, November 28, 2005. I take "manager" to be "administrator." See also Muscelin (2004) for a description of 1998 changes in "steering" in French universities. The Dutch university model has appointed deans, and an attempt was made by key Flemish Rectors at Leuven and Ghent in Belgium to institute this model. (Interview, Mr. Noel Vercrysse, Ministry of Education, Flemish Community, November 29, 2005)

⁹Katharina Holzinger at the Conference on "Governance and Policy-Making in the European Union," University of Osnabruck, November 2-4, 2006.

¹⁰EI says that it represents 348 organizations in 166 countries (141 in forty-one European countries), organizations "of teachers and education and research employees upholding the principle of independent Trade Unionism." See their website: <http://www.ei-ie.org/en/aboutus/> - "The Role of Academics in the Bologna Process" (Working Paper #15, February 2005) surveys, among other things, changes in working conditions, degrees of implementation, participation of the member organization at the national government level, etc. (Tables 8, 7, 2, 16). Majorities agreed

There appears to be no European-level professorial organization. Huisman and van der Wendt (2004, p. 354) argue that the level of support for change by both academics and students is key to the variation in implementation. They also expect greater turmoil as quality assurance issues, brain drain, minority language protection, and GATS come to the fore. My main point is that the category of actors that might be expected to have had opinions about, qualifications as to, or reservations about, changes to university “governance,” to external judgments of “quality,” to conditions of funding, etc. – that group was *hors du combat!*¹¹

IV. If the initiative for the Sorbonne/Bologna Process was in form and authority strictly intergovernmental, how did the Commission acquire a substantial role in the process?

There are three elements to an answer: (1) the clumsiness of a strictly intergovernmental process (generating implicit demand); (2) the Commission’s honed techniques of influence, developed under the constraints of a Treaty in which, in the area of education, it had a very small and delimited role (supply); (3) a new political context.

(1) Clumsy Intergovernmentalism?

By the first ministerial meeting after Bologna the Commission was made a regular participant (not an Observer). Why? Anne Corbett thought that by Prague (2001), the process was “stuck” for want of “policy development” and that they “brought in the Commission and EUA.”¹² The point is that the intergovernmental process by itself was probably “clumsy,” i.e., ineffective or inefficient or both, giving incentives to the Member States or the Presidency to look to the Commission. This is supposition. But it does imply that the states were generally speaking “in cahoots” with the entrepreneurial team.

(2) Continuity of Techniques Developed within Delimited Treaty Scope

The Treaty of Rome leaves the central area of education to the member states. (What would later be called “subsidiarity” would seem to reinforce this.) How then did the Commission become so deeply involved in it? They did have some Treaty authority. “Vocational education and training” had been put within the Commission’s authorized scope by virtue of its connection to the economic market. The Commission had had

or partly agreed with the statements: “The Bologna Process (BP) is a necessary push for national reform” (53 percent); “The outcomes of the BP are making it easier for our universities/colleges to interact with other European higher education systems” (84 percent); “The BP addresses important questions for our national higher educational institutions” (87 percent); *but also* “The BP contributes to standardizing our higher education system in a way that is alien to our national traditions” (68 percent), and “The BP represents a marketization of our national higher education system” (51 percent).

¹¹Interesting unintended testimony to this lack is an article by Ian Bache, a student of the EU (Bache, 2006). Bache takes issue with an EU-funded network in European studies (not at all part of the Bologna process). What is interesting for our purposes, however, is that he raises the question of *whether there were or are significant and appropriate channels through which academics, worried about the disciplinary or more broadly intellectual consequences of any part of the process, can be heard at the European level.*

¹²Interview, London, November 6, 2005.

some help as well from the European Court of Justice which in 1985 had defined “vocational education” so broadly that almost all university education would be considered “vocational” (Corbett 2005, pp. 123-25). The Commission was also given some Treaty authority over Research (TEU Article 189). In hindsight we can see that the sentence in the Maastricht Treaty saying that the Commission could/should “encourage” quality in Higher Education, although neither exclusive nor shared jurisdiction, could be used as authority to be a “chivvier”; it is permission to herd cats. The Commission considered that it gave them “Treaty based” authority in this field at last.¹³

Anne Corbett’s 2005 insightful monograph, *Universities and the Europe of Knowledge*, traces the Commission's efforts over nearly forty years to find a strategy in the educational sector. A key point, in 1976 was an institutional innovation, when an “Education Committee” was established in which the European Commission participated as a member in what otherwise looked like a comitology group (before there were such), that is, a gathering of national civil servants under the European Council (Corbett 2005, Chapter 7; European Commission 2006, pp. 88-89). Today we see parallels in several such arrangements in “open method of coordination” areas and similar processes like Bologna.

The kinds of techniques which the Commission developed, given the Treaty constraints, are relatively well known and I shall just note them here. In addition to behind-the-scenes diplomatic activity, the first and crucial technique is direct and indirect capacity creation (interestingly enough, very close to the techniques used in the accession process, where I think they first came to very public notice). DG Education and Culture and its Schools and Higher Education Unit have used funding directly to create and support organizations (for example, Eurydice, the information network on education in Europe (Brussels), or the European Journal of Education (Paris); these, over time, created the information, statistics and comparative analysis, academic knowledge and policy discussion on which both the States and the Commission then drew.

Some of the institutions that the Commission created exemplify what Suzanne Schmidt calls “support structures” needed because, she says, “mutual recognition” (which, grosso modo, is what Bologna aims at) shifts transaction costs from decision making to the implementation stage.¹⁴ Thus the important ENIC/NARIC centers (information centers and credential evaluators), and ENQA, the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies, for example, are intended to establish the “trust” among universities which will allow them to recognize, credit and accept students and scholars from other institutions, especially from other Bologna countries.

Indirectly, the Commission contracts out, as in the case of the important “Trends” series. *Trends IV: European Universities Implementing Bologna*, published by EUA, provided, for example: 1) implementation information for BFUG (the influential Bologna Follow-Up Committee which guides the process between the biannual ministerial meetings), and 2) descriptive analysis for more general availability especially for Ministries (or their critics) to make comparisons to “peers.”

¹³Haug interview. The Treaty source is Chapter 3, Art. 126 (Keeliing 2006, footnote 5).

¹⁴Susanne K.Schmidt at Osnabruck conference above, November 2-4, 2006.

Secondly, the Commission has also sought out interlocutors, “stakeholder” groups like ESIB, the organization representing national unions of students in Europe or, as we have seen, the EUA itself. It looks sometimes as if they have had a hand in, if not taken the initiative for, creating them. For example, in 2000 (the year of the Lisbon Agenda) three European student organizations, ESIB, AEGEE (Association des Etats Généraux des Etudiants de l’Europe) and “the Erasmus student network” were constituted as what was called a “European liaison group”; this group then participated in the European Commission-organized consultative meeting on Socrates and higher education, together with representatives of universities and other higher education institutions. Later ESIB alone won recognition as the representative of students (Klemencic 2007). In a second example, after the Lisbonization of Bologna, the Commission has also worked with (called in?) non-educational but interested “stakeholders” like ERT, the highly influential European Round Table (of some of the largest and most successful transnational firms), with whom other parts of the Commission had worked on other issues.¹⁵

Thirdly, the Commission may use its formal position within the EU legislative process to formulate and propose Recommendations to the Council and Parliament. If the Commission’s Recommendation becomes that of the EU’s Parliament and Council, then the substance of the Recommendation can be brought to the next Bologna Ministerial meeting with considerable expectation of passing; if passed there it will represent agreement by the forty-six.¹⁶

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the role of the Commission in framing educational issues is now well documented (see the next section.) It may reconceive the use of standard EU resources, for example, currently proposing that the states reorient the EU Structural Funds toward improving states’ support for research and human capital, (thus framing education and research issues as an ingredient in economic growth).¹⁷ Related to this the Commission often seeks to give technical issues a public face. For example it proposed an ECTS “label” for the diplomas of universities which have instituted ECTS throughout all their programs, or a Diploma Supplement “label” for universities which provide a DS with all diplomas, automatically, without cost, and in a major European language.

How does the Commission itself see its role? In December 1999 (just as the Bologna process was getting underway), Guy Haug argued that most ministers and universities were aware of internal issues, but not, for example, of the growth of transnational education, of the challenges of privatization, of the “decreasing attractiveness” of European higher education to the rest of the world.¹⁸ To increase this awareness was what he and the Commission-EUA collaboration had set out to do. Consciousness-

¹⁵Even before Bologna, CRE (the Association of European Universities, one of the predecessors of EUA), in a joint project with the European Commission and the European Roundtable of Industrialists, called upon universities to have “meaningful dialogue with their stakeholders (Davies).” For CERT-Commission relations in the crucial case of the Single European Act, see Cowles, 1995.

¹⁶“From Berlin to Bergen,” p. 3.

¹⁷Haug interview.

¹⁸Guy Haug , Keynote speech “Visions of a European Future: Bologna and Beyond,” 11th EAIE Conference, Maastricht, December 2, 1999, p. 2.

raising is also a Commission (in this case, a joint) role. In a 2006 Communication called "Delivering on the Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research, and Innovation," the Commission, after diagnosing the "challenges" to European universities and the "changes required," included a page headed "...and what the Commission can and should do":

The Commission is not a direct actor in the modernisation of universities, but it can play a catalytic role, providing political impetus and targeted funding in support of reform and modernization. (European Commission, COM 2006, 208 final, p. 1)

This is a good summary of the examples I've just given. However, it gives no idea of the ingenuity and persistent entrepreneurship¹⁹ with which they are used.

(3) New Political Conditions

What changed the political conditions was not directly connected to education per se. It was the EU's Lisbon Agenda, decided in 2000. In this connection the European Council "invited" the Ministers of Education to cooperate. "Now the Commission has the EU institutions behind it," related Guy Haug.²⁰ The Bologna Process was intellectually assimilated to the Lisbon Agenda, thus: 1) putting it squarely in an area where the Commission had authority (vis-à-vis EU members) (Keeling 2006), and 2) connecting it to the main preoccupation of the member states, the amelioration of the condition of their economies. Seen from the vantage point of the Lisbon Agenda, research and innovation, and the education that contributes to them, is viewed as a deployable resource.

Ruth Keeling (2006) elaborates astutely on the "European Commission's expanding role in higher education discourse," showing how it made Bologna and Lisbon a "'hybrid' Bologna/Lisbon agenda" "to firmly constitute - and reconstitute - higher education as a European policy domain." But the framing changed in another way. From a focus on individual students (focus on the "micro" level, student mobility, student preparation for the labor market, "making Europeans") the issues have been reframed to emphasize "society more broadly." Education is now being dealt with primarily as being in the service of society (largely economy, I would add).

The change was clear not only in the Commission's being brought into the Bologna process in 2001, but in its "work program" of 2002, "Education and Training 2010," which was adopted by the Ministers of Education. It was indicated as well by the efflorescence of Commission policy papers. The title of one document tells it all: "Mobilising the brainpower of Europe." A hard hitting critique, it calls for "enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy," and recommends a "core

¹⁹Corbett's theme is the entrepreneurship of several key Commission figures over time. For the origin of the concept of political entrepreneurship, see Frohlich, Oppenheimer and Young, 1971. Derek Beach (2004, 2005) argues generally that EU institutions can be thought of as "informal entrepreneurs," and that they face a strategic choice of "agenda setting" or "brokering." His major point is that "Governments are not fully in control even in the most intergovernmental fora..." (in his case, IGCs) (2005, p. 245).

²⁰Haug interview.

modernisation agenda”: “attractiveness, governance, and funding,” now revealing its view that universities must be differentiated, and must have “diversified” (i.e., not solely public) sources of funding. The Lisbon Agenda itself has not been the catalytic force that was hoped by its creators. But the Lisbonization of Bologna raised the priority of higher education policy by centering it on its role in the economy; in this way it confronted the “why are they horning in on a strictly national area?” argument, legitimating the involvement of the Commission.

V. Can Weak Organization Generate Strong Results?

If one thinks of the Commission's role in the Bologna Process in organizational terms one can discern three phases:

Phase 1: Sorbonne (1998) to Bologna (1999). Neither the EU nor the Commission is mentioned in either Declaration. The Commission-EUA network works for the broad acceptance of the Declaration of the four countries. It picks up the ball.

Phase 2: Bologna to Prague (2001). At Bologna the Commission is marginalized. By Prague (or at its Tampere preparatory meeting), the Commission is invited to be a full participant, although given no special role.

Phase 3: Prague (via Berlin 2003) and Bergen (2005) through London (2007). A BFUG report before the Berlin meeting argued for a change in the “steering structures”; there had been an extensive internal debate within BFUG on proposals for a permanent secretariat and/or permanent chair.²¹ This was not approved by the Ministers in Berlin. The system was (and is) that the country hosting the meeting provides the secretariat and the chair; that is, these rotate. Had the intention been for the Commission to be the Secretariat? Or had the Council of Europe, which was encouraging the extension to and beyond eastern European members, been in mind? Whichever it was, the question was raised again two years later at Bergen²² (at which the number of countries was raised to forty-five), and once again it was not accepted. From the standpoint of 2007, the Bologna intergovernmental system, now supplemented informally by Commission-aided information and policy capabilities, seems quite stable, even with a rotating Secretariat. If one thinks of phases not in terms of organizational characteristics but of political mandate, then the Commission is now empowered by its EU mandate to “encourage” quality, by the Education and Training 2010 Program authorized by the Bologna

²¹“Bologna Process between Prague and Berlin,” 116 pp. See pp. 52-54. This “Zgaga report” after its *rapporteur* was commissioned by BFUG to be presented at the Berlin Ministerial meeting in 2003.

²²Haug interview. One thinks of the “Pillar III question”: would the intergovernmental system put in place persist? Or, as happened in the area of EU “asylum” policy, where member states took such care in the Maastricht Treaty to isolate the whole domain of Justice and Home Affairs from the Commission and from “normal” EU policymaking, would the states find in the longer run that they were too hampered by the ineffectiveness of the system?

Hix (2005, p. 370) notes that, during the time of the isolated Pillar III, the Commission strengthened its ability to develop policy ideas, wrote “think pieces, funded independent research and established internal organization,” what Hix calls a “long-term strategy.” The techniques sound familiar.

Education Ministers, and also, powerfully, by the “convergence” of Bologna with the Lisbon agenda.

Clearly, compared to the “Monnet method,” the Commission has no exclusive right of initiative. However, since before the Bologna Declaration, the Commission/Universities (EUA) alliance has been evident in the diagnoses made, areas and proposals selected, kind of operationalization and review procedures, that is, persistent initiatives. Clearly also the Commission lacks sanctions. Guy Haug, when asked whether he then considered the Bologna method “a weak method,” responded: “It is a weak method,” but it is operating “in the context of great awareness”²³ (which I take to mean awareness of common or parallel problems, of the challenging global environment, of authoritative comparative information, etc.). What has changed is not the subsidiarity constraint but the political mandate for what some analysts call the Commission’s “leading role,”²⁴ and I would call the leadership role of the Commission- EUA alliance.

Processes and Drivers

Despite – perhaps because of – the Treaty constraints under which it operated for so long, the Commission has crafted a catalytic and coordinative role. The experience of the Bologna Process is a clear example of the EU’s structure shaping the Commission’s approach even to what was never formally an EU process. And its role might be indispensable to this very process. Non-hierarchical processes, to be effective, probably need at a minimum two elements: first, a body with “permission to herd cats,” and second, a real political mandate, leadership and a mandate.

Processes, hard or soft, need drivers, actors who use them for some purpose. In the case of the Bologna Process, it seems to this writer that there was an “entrepreneurial alliance” between the Commission and European Universities Association. A critical aim for EUA was to insure that any restructuring of European Universities was founded upon university autonomy, and it was willing to educate its members that the price for this was accountability (which involved assessment). The Commission was interested in a greater role in formulating strategies for European education and, spurred by external competition, in promoting changes which would enhance European economies and make European higher education itself globally competitive and attractive. This alliance produced information, analyses, and policy proposals. It was this alliance which drove the Bologna Process. The “permissive consensus” among those states which had initiated the process allowed the drivers to drive. Without drivers, even an explicit consensus on the general nature of the problem and upon general objectives would have been unlikely to have induced significant results with some degree of uniformity across many countries (although it is certainly possible that some countries with determined governments might have been able to make their own domestic changes).

There were other implicit “alliances: (1) the Commission – with many of the Ministries of Education which wanted reform they could not produce by themselves; (2)

²³Haug interview.

²⁴Huisman and van der Wende (2004), p. 352.

these Ministries – with some Rectors and Rectors’ teams; (3) the Commission – and organizations representing students. My argument is that a political analysis of Bologna would be an analysis of all these alliances in relation to those parties that were permissive, were not organized, or were left out.

The Future of Bologna?

The Bologna “table” has expanded from twenty-nine to forty-six states, radically increasing its diversity. One veteran expert summed it up as “too many countries, too many observers, too many goals!”²⁵ It remains to be seen whether the extraordinarily elaborate coordinating institutions and networks put in place will be able to cope with such an expansion.

More importantly, Bologna is turning now from consensus creation among states to what I would call “deep implementation.” Its main focus is no longer credit systems and diploma supplements but “quality assurance” and “university governance,” issues which challenge traditional roles, norms and prerogatives of actors within universities, and even within ministries, that is, much more intrusive issues.

Some aspects of its process might in fact be helpful. Abbott and Snidal, in a discussion of the relative advantages of soft versus hard law, note that the “participation in national decisions by international actors and by concerned domestic bureaucracies and NGOs” which characterizes many “soft law” contexts, can be “advantageous” (2000) (in this context, presumably to the reformers). In states where ministries closely control universities, this dual level approach might indeed help top university administrators in carrying out reforms. Recent Commission papers emphasizing the need for “leadership” and “modernized governance” are clearly aimed at this. It has been suggested that this collaboration, both by states and across the states, may have potential for undermining the “hard mode” of the hierarchical state in this issue area, if in fact it succeeds in “delinking” higher education from it.²⁶

However, there has been little discussion about how to elicit cooperation within the University for the goals and changes articulated at the top (by the Ministries and Rector teams). Will such a “non-hierarchical” process still be effective if it rests primarily upon hierarchy at the state and/or university level? Will it succeed if, for instance, its conception of “stakeholders” omits the tenured faculty, and uses terms like “staff” to blur this omission?

VI. Conclusions

This article has not been about implementation, however, but about the coordinative-diplomatic process which has led to such a surprising spread not only of goals, but of courses of action and instruments. The Bologna Process has been predominantly cooperative, but with a dual track (diplomatic/epistemic) sponsor of initiatives, a

²⁵Haug interview.

²⁶Discussion at Osnabruck conference above. “Delinking” here refers to promoting a policy of universities defining their own missions and being assessed by independent third parties, not by the state.

driver which has been able to use its “hub” position not just to coordinate, but to lead. It has created concepts and uniform operationalizations, assembling, classifying and analyzing the comparative information it requires of the states. It has used joint “commitment” and jointly agreed instruments,²⁷ together with “support structures” which supply “templates” for reform. Its strategy of reforming and improving “European” education implies that a “rising tide raises all ships.”

Have the other governance modes been in evidence? Up to this point competition has been focused on universities from other regions of the globe. However, benchmarking is implicitly competitive, and now the Commission is working towards a “European ranking” to answer the Shanghai ranking.²⁸ Negotiation is difficult to trace in what is treated as a matter for expertise, but possible evidence might be seen after the fact, in (1) the “loosening of the 3 plus 2 model,” (2) changes now being made in ECTS to reflect not only time spent and level of material, but also “learning outcomes” (3) in the fact that the proposal for a single European “Register” of Quality Assurance Agencies, able to be selected by any university from any country, has been altered to permit national authorities to accord recognition to those QAAs they will permit their universities to use.²⁹ Has hierarchy played a role? My assumption is that we would find that within states. As the issues become more intrusive, we may see more visible use of domestic hierarchy.

Waltraud Schelke has argued that OMC is “an attempt to institutionalize a sustained effort to reform...” (2004, p. 7) Even those who are cautious about the effectiveness of OMC processes, to which Bologna bears a strong resemblance, argue that they help to identify and advance common interests on those issues in which all have the same interests and no one can be advantaged by cheating. Peter Leslie, who gave the more stringent formulation underlined above, named “adaptation to globalization” as a possible example.³⁰ This is one way to look at the restructuring of higher education in Europe, and, to boot, there do not seem to be many ways to cheat or free ride, so perhaps the prognosis is not so bad!

²⁷On the power of “instruments,” see Bruno et al. (2006).

²⁸The purpose of stocktaking is an analysis of “where we stand, not races between countries,” according to the Chairman of the Stocktaking Working Group, Prof. Andrejs Rauhvargers. But note European Commission, “From Bergen to London,” pp. 5 and 19, and note the Commission’s support and funding for devising an “alternative” European ranking, taking account of diversities.

²⁹Applications for inclusion on the register should be evaluated on the basis of substantial compliance with the ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, adopted at the 2005 Ministerial meeting—BH) evidenced through an independent review process *endorsed by national authorities, where this endorsement is required by those authorities* (emphasis mine) (London Communiqué, May 18, 2007, Point 2.14. Also “Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education” (2006/147/EC).

³⁰Prof. Peter Leslie, comments at “Open Method of Coordination. Roundtable on Renewing 29 Applications for inclusion on the register should be evaluated on the basis of Federal-Provincial Cooperation,” in “Canada: What Can Be Learned from the EU Open Method of Coordination?” Montreal, February 11, 2005, Institute for European Studies, McGill University—Université de Montréal.

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