Bologna Follow-up Seminar Bachelor's Degree : What Is It?

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Report by the Rapporteur

Senior Adviser Sverre Rustad, Secretariat of the Bologna Follow-up Group

1. Background

1.1 The bachelor's degree in the context of the Bologna Process

1.1.1 The Bologna Declaration, 1999

Adoption of a degree structure essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, has been one of the action lines of the Bologna Process from the very beginning. It is closely linked to the objective of making higher education degrees more easily readable and comparable across national borders, which in turn is a necessary condition for mobility.

The Bologna Declaration specifies that the first cycle should last a minimum of three years. The degree awarded should both give access to second cycle studies and at the same time "be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification". In many countries, this degree is called "bachelor" (in Russian *bakalavr*).

1.1.2 The Helsinki seminar on Bachelor-level Degrees, 2001

Bachelor-level degrees were the theme of a Bologna seminar in Helsinki, Finland on 16-17 February 2001. The seminar highlighted the fact that long first study cycles, high drop-out rates and the lengthening of university studies were problems shared by many European countries, and argued that a bachelor-master structure may offer several advantages in comparison with long programmes leading directly to the master's degree (or a comparable degree depending on the national system). It is more flexible, promoting mobility; it allows more interaction between studies and working life; it may help answer the need of the labour market for more people with higher education qualifications; and not least, its adoption will facilitate better recognition of European degrees both within Europe and in the rest of the world, and will thus also make European higher education more attractive for international students.

In order to help achieve these goals, the seminar proposed a set of criteria for the definition of European bachelor-level degrees:

- Bachelor-level degree is a higher education qualification the extent of which is 180 to 240 credits (ECTS). It normally takes three to four years of full-time study to complete the degree. Bachelor-level degrees play an important role in the life-long learning paradigm and learning to learn skills should be an essential part of any bachelor-level degree.
- It is important to note that the bachelor-level degrees, often referred to as first degrees can be taken at either traditional universities or at professionally-oriented higher education institutions. Programmes leading to the degree may, and indeed should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs.
- In order to increase transparency it is important that the specific orientation and profile and learning outcomes of a given qualification are included in its title and

explained on the Diploma Supplement issued to the student. Information on different study programmes should be transparent to enable the students make informed choices.

 Even bachelor degrees which serve as an intermediate qualification preparing students for further study should be based on a proper curriculum. They should not only be seen as a part of a longer curriculum, as some students may wish to change direction or to choose a graduate programme or specialisation offered at another institution.¹

The conclusions from the seminar emphasise the interaction between higher education and society at large, arguing that all bachelor-level curricula should include transversal or generic skills and competences. They recognise that in some fields which involve professional accreditation, bachelor-level degrees will not always serve as independent qualifications leading to full professional competence. However, even in such fields an intermediate qualification may be worth developing to take advantage of the possibilities offered by a bachelor-level degree. Finally, higher education institutions and their networks of stakeholders were encouraged to develop descriptions of the core competences expected from graduates of bachelor and master programmes in broad subject areas as a means of enhancing transparency and comparability. This call has since been answered through the *Tuning* project.²

1.1.3 The Prague Communiqué, 2001

The Ministers meeting in Prague noted with satisfaction that the objective of a degree structure based on two main cycles had been tackled and discussed since Bologna, and that some countries had already adopted such a structure while others were considering it. Referring to the Helsinki Seminar, they further noted that in many countries bachelor's and master's (or comparable) degrees can be obtained at both universities and other higher education institutions, and that programmes leading to a degree may, and indeed should, have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs.

1.1.4 From Prague to Berlin

In February 2002 an informal group known as the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) met in Dublin to draft *descriptors* for bachelor's and master's degrees that might be shared within the European Higher Education Area.³ While the Helsinki seminar indicated a scope for bachelor's degrees measured in years or ECTS, the JQI sought to identify the academic and other requirements that, as outcomes, characterise and distinguish between bachelors and masters. The descriptors were designed to indicate an overarching summary of the outcomes of a programme of study in terms of the abilities and attributes that a student must have to be

¹ Quoted from the General Report of professor Pedro Lourtie to the Prague Ministerial Conference, see http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/0105Lourtie_report.pdf.

² Tuning Educational Structures in Europe. More information about the project can be found on the Europa Internet server: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/Tuning.html; or on the servers of the coordinating institutions:

University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain (www.relint.deusto.es/TuningProject/index.htm) or University of Groningen, The Netherlands (www.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/index.htm).

³ The JQI has since also developed descriptors for the doctoral level (March 2004) and for short-cycle programmes within the bachelor level (October 2004). See www.jointquality.org.

awarded the qualification in question. They would describe *all* bachelor's and *all* master's degrees within the EHEA, and would thus be generic. The group agreed that the value of the generic descriptors would be substantially enhanced by cross-referencing to more detailed programme profiles or specifications developed in national, regional or institutional contexts.

The descriptor for the bachelor's degree specifies that the degree is awarded to students who

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon and supersedes their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a
 professional⁴ approach to their work or vocation, and have competences⁵ typically
 demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within
 their field of study;
- have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;
- can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

The Joint Quality Initiative is not formally part of the Bologna Process, but the working group set down by the Bologna Follow-up Group to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area has since decided to use the Dublin descriptors as an element in the framework.

In March 2003, a Bologna seminar was held in Helsinki to examine the characteristics of *master-level degrees*, following the conference on bachelor-level degrees two years earlier. Partly building on the Dublin descriptor, the seminar drew up a set of recommendations for master's degrees in the European Higher Education Area. Some of the recommendations also concerned the bachelor's degree. Underlining that bachelor's and master's degrees should have different defined outcomes and be awarded at different levels, the seminar recommended that *all* bachelor degrees should open access to master studies. The observation from the previous Helsinki seminar that integrated one-tier programmes might continue to exist in certain fields was repeated, as was the recommendation that opportunities for access to intermediate qualifications and transfer to other programmes should be encouraged even in such cases.

Later the same month, another seminar in Copenhagen discussed qualifications structures in higher education in Europe. The seminar recommended that *qualifications frameworks* should be developed both at the national and the European level as a means of promoting transparency, comparability, quality and recognition of higher education qualifications. Such

⁴ "The word 'professional' is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements related to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile/specification." (JQI footnote)

⁵ "The word 'competence' is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills. It is not used in the narrower sense identified solely on the basis of a 'yes/no' assessment." (JQI footnote)

frameworks should seek to describe qualifications at each appropriate level in terms of workload, level, quality, learning outcomes and profile.

In 2003 Eurydice, the EU information network on education in Europe, published its study *Focus on the Structure of Higher Education in Europe 2003/2004*, giving an overview of "Bologna" reforms in 29 countries. The study showed that a bachelor-master structure had been implemented in most of the countries, and was perhaps the Bologna action line where most progress had been made. However, the two-cycle structure was found to be uncommon at ISCED level 5B. The *Trends 2003* report prepared by the EUA at the same time corroborates this description, but points out that all the different aspects of the Bologna Process are closely interrelated and that introducing a two-tier degree structure is in itself not enough to achieve transparency. Most bachelor's degrees charted by *Trends 2003* were found to have a scope of 180 ECTS credits, but first degrees of 210 and 240 credits were also found.

Trends 2003 also charted the penetration of the two-cycle structure at the institutional level, as well as attitudes to the new degrees. A majority of higher education institutions had introduced the two-tier degree system, confirming the situation described by ministries. Employability was stressed as an important factor in the accompanying curricular reforms. On the other hand, in a number of countries the bachelor's degree was still seen mainly as a stepping-stone to further studies at the time when the report was prepared.⁶

1.1.5 The Berlin Communiqué, 2003

The section on implementation of a two-cycle degree structure in the Berlin Communiqué sums up preceding developments and sets the political priorities for the present period. The full text reads:

Degree structure: Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles

Ministers are pleased to note that, following their commitment in the Bologna Declaration to the two-cycle system, a comprehensive restructuring of the European landscape of higher education is now under way. All Ministers commit themselves to having started the implementation of the two cycle system by 2005.

Ministers underline the importance of consolidating the progress made, and of improving understanding and acceptance of the new qualifications through reinforcing dialogue within institutions and between institutions and employers.

Ministers encourage the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.

Within such frameworks, degrees should have different defined outcomes. First and second cycle degrees should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. First cycle

⁶ Reichert, Sybille and Christian Tauch, *Trends 2003: Progress towards the European Higher Education Area*, European University Association 2003, pp. 45-55.

degrees should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes. Second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies.

Ministers invite the Follow-up Group to explore whether and how shorter higher education may be linked to the first cycle of a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area.

1.2 The bachelor's degree in Russia

Russia was accepted as a member of the Bologna Process at the ministerial conference in Berlin in September 2003, and is thus not included in either of the studies referred to above. Bachelor's degrees were introduced at the Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow as early as 1989, and on a broader basis from 1992. Legislation adopted from 1992 to 1996 establishes bachelor-level programmes as a possible basis for enrolment to specialist's or master's degree programmes, specifying their respective total duration to 4 (bachelor), 5 (specialist) and 6 (master) years. The bachelor/master structure is not applied to ISCED 5B programmes.

Implementation of the two-cycle degree structure is optional for the higher education institutions. At some institutions the decision is delegated to the faculties. Whereas bachelor programmes exist at 50.7 % of the institutions, only 7.2 % of the students are enrolled in such programmes. The overwhelming majority are still enrolled in traditional 5-year specialist diploma studies. At St. Petersburg State University, on the other hand, 25-30 % of the students are in two-cycle programmes. In all, Russia has about 6 million students.

Russia is, of course, a vast country. In addition to national Bologna events like the present seminar, a series of regional seminars is therefore planned in order to assist higher education institutions all over the country in implementing the necessary reforms at the institutional level.

2. The Seminar

2.1 General

The seminar was jointly organised by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, the Committee for Education and Science of the State Duma, St. Petersburg State University and the Council of Europe. It was well attended from the Russian side, with around 150 participants. Participation from other Bologna member states was more limited, with around 30 participants from 13 countries. The working languages were English and Russian, with simultaneous translation in the plenary sessions and in three of four working groups.

Discussions took place on the basis of thematic introductions as well as presentations of experiences from other countries. The seminar may be said to have had a double focus, in that part of the discussion was concerned with general characteristics of the bachelor's degree and the benefits and possible disadvantages of a two- (three-) cycle structure, whereas another part was concerned more particularly with the situation in Russia. With regard to the latter, the

⁷ Figures provided by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation

focus was on the extent and pace of change and how to preserve valuable features of the old degree system. Special attention was paid to the structure of Russian postgraduate degrees, with a presentation devoted to this theme.

Professor Vadim Kasevich, Vice Rector of the University, gave an introduction to the problems under discussion against the background outlined in section 1. Since 1999 many new countries have become members of the Bologna Process, including countries without a two-cycle structure. Different understandings of the bachelor's degree exist between and even within countries, and transparency objectives are not always observed.

Professor Kasevich pointed to a number of reasons behind the introduction of a two-cycle system, including the needs both of mass education and of the labour market. Knowledge becomes obsolete very quickly; at the same time higher education has become more competitive, and a flexible system helps. The bachelor's degree gives a broad grounding. Creative thinking and problem-solving abilities are necessary and must be stimulated from the beginning. In Russia as well as in other countries each level of education should be designed both to serve as a basis for further studies and to meet the needs of the labour market.

Discussing the role of credits, learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks and descriptors in defining the bachelor's degree, and citing examples from other countries, professor Kasevich argued that splitting traditional degrees into two levels makes little sense if the first does not lead to an independent qualification. In Russia the reform of the degree structure is still not completed, and competing proposals exist. Four preliminary conclusions were suggested:

- The bachelor's degree must become the basic type of higher education. Exceptions in the form of integrated long programmes must be well justified in each case.
- The main characteristic must not be the time of learning, but the outcomes and the number of credits.
- Working on generic attributes is useful, but special descriptors must be worked out by the specialist community.
- The creative development of the student should be stimulated. Therefore, the bachelor's degree should involve the student in research. This is not sufficiently emphasised at present.

2.2 Experiences from other countries

Presentations were given by Gerhard Duda (Germany), Sirkka-Leena Hörkkö (Finland) and Florent Stora (France). In addition a paper on joint study programmes for the bachelor's level was presented by professor Kasevich. Finland and Germany both have binary institutional systems. Both countries have introduced legislation to establish a new degree structure with the bachelor's degree as the standard qualification, but whereas in Germany there will only be one type of bachelor, in Finland the degree will have a different profile in universities and polytechnics. In Germany the bachelor can have a duration of 3 or 4 years, but 82.8 % of bachelor programmes are 180 ECTS. Around 10 % of students are currently in bachelor programmes, and studies indicate that the degree is accepted in the labour market. Problems with the old degree system, in the form of long duration of studies, inflexible programmes, high dropout rates and difficulties with recognition, were cited as a major motivation for the reform. France, which is also introducing a three-tier degree system, similarly pointed to

reduced failure rates as an important objective. Here the bachelor-level degree is called "licence". Finland cited internationalisation as a motive behind the reforms, and stressed the importance of involving the institutions, as did France. The Finnish government had introduced earmarked funding to aid the transition.

2.3 Aspects of the debate

2.3.1 General characteristics of the bachelor's degree

As already mentioned, in his general introduction professor Vadim Kasevich stressed the importance of stimulating creative thinking in bachelor programmes, arguing that this aspect is not sufficiently emphasised either in the Dublin descriptors or available literature. In some cases the programmes seem to be conceived as concerned with typical problems only, designed to educate candidates who can implement ideas, but not generate them.

Nicolaas Heerens from ESIB gave an introduction to the bachelor's degree from a students' perspective. In his view, all bachelor programmes should address all the four main purposes of higher education:

- personal development
- preparation for life as an active citizen in a democratic society
- development and maintenance of an advanced knowledge base
- preparation for the labour market

The programmes should have a balance between broad and specialist knowledge, emphasising transversal skills and "sustainable employability"/learning to learn. Curricula should be flexible and based on learning outcomes, allowing for individual learning paths. Students should play a central role in curriculum development. Employability should be a core concern, and relations with the labour market strengthened. The restructuring of old curricula should not be conceived of as a means of shortening total study time, but of achieving flexibility. Generic skills should be emphasised.

Several speakers stressed the importance of flexibility, both in a lifelong learning perspective and in relation to a rapidly changing labour market, and the advantages of the bachelor's degree in this respect compared with longer, integrated first degrees. Also, the need for generic skills and a balance between generic and specialist knowledge was a recurring theme.

A special feature of Russian bachelor programmes is a specified minimum of humanities subjects prescribed by state standards. This creates difficulties in relation to joint degrees and other forms of cooperation with foreign institutions. On the other hand it was pointed out that such elements exist in other countries as well, and that humanities are not the same as soft skills, but serve to help the students learn to reflect critically. Working group 1 was also devoted to this theme. Here it was argued by some that the uniform "block" of humanities should not be kept, as there is no direct link between the object of studies and the qualities produced. International cooperation requires comparable degrees described in terms of learning outcomes and competences. As there were different views, the group recommended that a working group should be established to further elaborate the role of humanities in the bachelor's degree.

The theme of Working group 2 was learning outcomes, competence and overarching criteria for bachelor-level qualifications. Here it was argued that a certain core of key competences

could be defined for all bachelor's degrees, whether they lead directly to a profession or are of a more general nature. The *Tuning* approach to learning outcomes corresponds well with Russian traditions and may serve as a bridge between European and Russian degrees, taking into account both the teachers' and the employers' point of view. Institutions tend to put in everything that they think is necessary; therefore a clearer focus on objectives and outcomes is needed. It was argued that the bachelor's degree does not give scope for a proper thesis. In Russia, the degree is not well known or accepted in the labour market in spite of nationwide standards. A less rigid system is therefore needed. The group concluded that taking into account the wide differences in bachelor training, it is important to pay attention to generic competences and to describe programmes in terms of learning outcomes including both generic and specific competences.

Working group 4 was devoted to requirements for access to master-level studies, with participants referring to the systems in their respective countries, including selection procedures, as a basis for discussion. The Bologna Declaration and later communiqués stipulate that the bachelor's degree shall give access to the second cycle, i.e. a right to be considered for admission, but the group concluded that the final decision on admission should rest with the institution, especially for interdisciplinary master's programmes. Again it was recommended that a working group should be set up to study special features of national variations and make recommendations to the BFUG.

2.3.2 The bachelor's degree and the labour market

This was the theme both of a presentation by professor Gennady Lukichev and of the fourth working group. Professor Lukichev started by pointing to some of the motivations for introducing the bachelor's degree: efficiency, compatibility, competitiveness and the idea of the knowledge-based society, which requires flexibility. A system with long, monolithic first degrees is not sufficiently adaptable to technological progress. The requirements formulated by society and by the Bologna process thus coincide, and an approach is adopted where educational programmes become more oriented towards the labour market. This will require both improved dialogue with employers and a cultural change at the higher education institutions. Employers should take part in the planning of programmes on a permanent basis.

Bachelors will form a large part of the workforce in future. They must therefore meet the needs of the labour market, with a balance of specialist knowledge and generic skills. The professional elements (both specific and broader) in the bachelor programmes should be strengthened, combining the best from the old and new degree systems. An educational environment must be created which allows bachelors to continue their education in a lifelong perspective. Independent candidates means participating students. The working environment itself must be conducive to learning.

Referring to the Bologna seminar on employability in Bled, Slovenia in October 2004, professor Lukichev drew the following conclusions:

- There is a need for closer cooperation between higher education and the labour market
- There should be a balance in bachelor programmes between specialist knowledge and generic skills, with an emphasis on "learning to learn"
- New quality criteria should be introduced with an emphasis on final competences
- Students should be involved in the planning of study programmes

 There should be no division between academic and professional bachelors; all should be research-based and research-driven

In the ensuing debate there was some discussion about the nature of higher education as a public good in relation to the labour market with its short-term economic goals. In this context it was pointed out that an increasing number of students in Russia pay fees, and that in this sense the public good is influenced by market relations. There nevertheless seemed to be general agreement that relations between higher education and the labour market need to be strengthened. At present there is a mismatch between candidates' specialisations and labour market needs, which may be reduced with closer contacts. One of the benefits of the two-cycle structure is that candidates can get labour market experience in-between the cycles. In Russia, however, this kind of mobility is hampered by financial problems and a lack of internal infrastructure.

The bachelor's degree is not well known or accepted by employers in Russia. Employers tend to want to keep the traditional integrated programmes, and are not well informed about ongoing processes and reforms. This must be rectified. In return employers should be asked what qualifications they require the candidates to have.

Employability for bachelors was also the theme of Working group 3. Here some incongruities were pointed out, e.g. that teachers in Russia are required to have a five-year degree, with the result that bachelors go on to do a fifth year to qualify as specialists. On the other hand it was pointed out that the two-tier system gives the advantage of allowing students to choose their structure of education after 3-4 years, and of selecting only the best students for master programmes. It was emphasised that bachelor's degrees should not be introduced for the purpose of saving money, risking a lowering of standards. The group concluded that improved mechanisms for interaction between higher education and the labour market need to be devised so as to ensure that the bachelor's degree is known among employers and meets labour market needs.

2.3.3 Future degree structure in Russia

Professor Vladimir Troyan gave a presentation on the relationship between the bachelor's degree and postgraduate studies in Russia. Giving an overview of the existing situation, he noted a varying degree of readiness among Russian higher education institutions to change to a two-cycle structure, with a view in some quarters that a master's degree might be awarded after 5 or 6 years without a preceding bachelor's degree. The relevant legislation speaks of "integration of the system of higher and post-university education of the Russian Federation into the world system of higher education, maintaining and developing the achievements and traditions of the higher education of Russia".

Professor Troyan discussed two possible alternatives for postgraduate studies, both building on a 4-year bachelor: either a two-year master's degree (2 ½ years for experimental subjects) followed by a three-year doctorate, or a five-year integrated doctoral programme. The latter would be the exception and would only be for training especially talented students to become researchers. In either case the doctoral degree ("kandidat nauk") should be awarded by a university, which would also be responsible for developing the programme and should have full authority over standards and assessment. Bachelors should not be admitted directly to existing, three-year doctoral studies. The existing "second doctorate" (doktor nauk) would be preserved unchanged.

The proposals would necessitate changes in current legislation. At present all higher education programmes are regulated by state standards, and assessment is carried out by central degree commissions.

From the floor it was argued that there should be no exceptions, meaning that admission to doctoral studies should require a master's degree in all cases. It was further suggested that this might be one of the recommendations from the seminar. Similarly, it was argued that integrated master programmes should only exist as exceptions, with the two-tier structure as the main model. Otherwise there would be a danger that no real changes were made. There seemed to be a general consensus that the bachelor's degree in Russia should have a duration of 4 years due to the low entry level (11 years of school) compared with many other countries.

Another part of the discussion concerned the pace of change and whether the two-cycle structure should be obligatory for the institutions. Several speakers underlined the danger of moving too quickly and thus throwing over board valuable elements of the existing system. Standards should not be reduced. It was also argued that students should have a choice between different types of degrees and that the bachelor/master structure should therefore not be obligatory. On the other hand the system needs to be promoted to make it better known.

Finally there was some discussion about the strong links between the higher education institutions and the state, with several speakers arguing in favour of increased institutional autonomy as a prerequisite both for realising the potential of the new degree system and more generally for integration in the Bologna Process.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

On the basis of the discussions at the seminar, the organisers have submitted the following conclusions and recommendations to the Bologna Follow-up Group for consideration:

- 1. Taking into account the significant role played by humanities and social sciences in curricula in terms of ensuring generic competences, and at the same time widely divergent views and practices concerning the number of credits allocated to the humanities in different study programmes, the seminar recommends to set up a special working group for the study of the role to be played by humanities in higher education.
- 2. Proceeding from the general agreement that bachelor-level programmes are meant to ensure sufficiently broad competences, programme designers are recommended to pay special attention to interdisciplinary and field-specific modules. Based on existing descriptors the structure of competences would then be as follows: generic competences, interdisciplinary competences, field-specific competences and subject-specific competences.
- 3. In designing bachelor-level study programmes for higher education, the designers should pay more attention to labour-market requirements and challenges.
- 4. It is recommended to amend the position taken by the Bologna Declaration to make it clear that access to doctoral studies shall require a completed master's degree.

4. Presentations

The presentations from the seminar are available on the Bologna-Bergen web page at www.bologna-bergen2005.no.