What is the Bologna Process?

The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental initiative aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area by 2010 and making Europe a world leader in higher education. The process was launched in June 1999, when higher education ministers from 29 countries, including the UK, committed themselves to six action lines. Every two years the ministers meet to review progress and to set the agenda for the following phase. The most recent such meeting of the 46 signatory countries was held in April 2009 in Leuven. It concluded that “the full and proper implementation” of the Bologna objectives “will require increased momentum and commitment after 2010.”

The first of the original action lines was the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. Ten years ago there was no such thing as European higher education, only a confusing jumble of different national systems, each with its own types and nomenclature of awards (which varied in terms of length, content and structure), ways of assessing and recording student achievement, and approaches to assuring quality and standards. This made it difficult for students and graduates to move from one country to another during and after their studies and for academics and employers in one country to understand and recognise awards gained in another. Some way of making European higher education qualifications mutually intelligible was needed.

So the second Bologna action line was the adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles of undergraduate and graduate qualifications. The first (bachelor’s) cycle would last a minimum of three years, be relevant to the European labour market and give access to second cycle programmes. The second (master’s) cycle, for which no length was specified, would give access to doctoral studies. In 2003 the two cycle system was expanded to three by separating the master’s and doctoral levels.

This reform has resulted in the extensive restructuring of higher education in many European countries (though not, of course, the UK), as lengthy and undifferentiated first degree programmes were divided into bachelor’s and master’s phases. In many cases, this has involved a radical rethinking not just of structures but also of content and pedagogy; in particular, the adoption of a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning and the introduction of the concept of learning outcomes. Most of the key reforms associated with the Bologna Process took place before and independent of that initiative as part of the radical shake-up in UK higher education that began in the early 1990s and gathered pace after the 1997 Dearing Report.

According to the European University Association, “the Bologna Process does not aim to harmonise national education systems but rather to provide tools to connect them.”

One of the most important tools is the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, which was adopted in 2005 as a common reference point for the national qualifications frameworks which Bologna countries are committed to implementing by 2010. This overarching framework describes in generic terms the typical learning outcomes associated with each of the three cycles. Scotland already had a national qualifications framework for higher education, developed as part of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, which was verified in 2006 as compatible with the Framework for Qualifications.
Another important development associated with the creation of common European reference points at the subject level is the work of the Tuning Educational Structures in Europe project. This group has begun publishing reference points for the design and delivery of degree programmes in a variety of subjects.

The third Bologna action line concerns the establishment of a system of credits. Ten years before the Bologna Declaration, the European Commission developed a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) to help academics recognise the learning acquired during Erasmus exchange programmes by providing a common measure of student workload. ECTS has since been adopted by most European institutions as a common instrument for credit accumulation as well as credit transfer; in many cases ECTS is enshrined in national legislation.

A key feature of ECTS, according the latest Users’ Guide, is the statement that “60 ECTS credits are attached to the workload of a full-time year of formal learning (academic year) and the associated learning outcomes. In most cases, student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, whereby one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work.”

Another tool developed as part of the Bologna Process to assist the mutual recognition of academic awards is the Diploma Supplement. This is a template for describing an award so as to make it easier to understand and compare, by providing information in a standard format about the nature, level, context, content and status of the programme and about the national higher education system in which the award was gained. In 2003 ministers agreed that, as from 2005, all students should received the Diploma Supplement on graduation “automatically and free of charge.” The new Higher Education Achievement Report, recommended by the Burgess Committee and currently being piloted in 18 UK institutions, will incorporate the European Diploma Supplement.

The fourth Bologna action line is the promotion of mobility. The communiqué issued by the ministerial meeting at Leuven boldly states that “mobility shall be the hallmark” of the EHEA, sets a target for 2020 of at least 20% of European graduates to have been mobile during their studies, and calls for the integration of opportunities for mobility in the structure of all degree programmes within each of the three cycles through the creation of “mobility windows”.

The fifth Bologna action line is promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance. Much effort has gone into supporting the development of robust national and institutional QA systems, since these help not only to increase the attractiveness of European higher education but also to create the climate of trust and confidence that is a prerequisite for the mutual recognition of qualifications. The adoption in 2005 of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance has given the Bologna Process another common reference point, against which the QAA was externally reviewed in 2008 and found to be compliant.

The sixth action line is promotion of the European dimension in higher education. One of the most effective ways of doing so is through the Erasmus Mundus scheme, which funds scholarships and fellowships for third country students and staff, as well as partnerships with third country institutions. In 2008/09 over 100 joint master’s programmes, involving 2000 students and 450 staff from outside Europe, benefitted from the scheme. Nearly 40% of these involved UK institutions, eight of them from Scotland: Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt (3), Queen Margaret, St Andrews (2) and Strathclyde. The next phase of the Erasmus Mundus scheme, which runs from 2009 to 2013 with a budget of 950 euros, funds joint doctoral as well as master’s programmes, and provides scholarships/fellowships for both European and third country students. By harmonising structures and processes and by increasing transparency, the Bologna reforms are making it easier to form consortia with other European institutions to deliver joint programmes.
Since 1999, a further four Bologna action lines have been added: these include **doctoral studies** and the synergy between the EHEA and the European Research Area.