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## **Implementing the Bologna Process – The Austrian Way**

Theo Hug, Innsbruck / A

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#### **Abstract**

The paper presents an overview on history and current efforts of implementing the Bologna Process in Austria. It gives a short description of country specific backgrounds such as institutional structures or legislative contexts and it outlines important developments and actions taken to ensure active participation and to promote the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area. Furthermore, succeeding and problematic dimensions including the role of ICT and e-learning are balanced and critically reflected. The results are summarized and highlighted with reference to the concept of operative fictions.

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## **Implementing the Bologna Process – The Austrian Way**

by Theo Hug (Innsbruck / A)

### ***Introduction***

Currently, regarding the implementation of the objectives of the Bologna Declaration in Austria there are no empirical data<sup>1</sup> available in terms of a qualitative or quantitative survey. However, the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture has set up a monitoring project for accompaniment and support of the implementation processes in the university sector. In the context of this project two reports with respect to the period from 1999 to 2005 have been compiled. Furthermore, a website<sup>2</sup> has been installed in order to inform all parties interested or involved in Austria and to disseminate information about national developments in Europe by the Federal Ministry.

The paper refers to these sources of information on the one hand. On the other hand, the description of the Austrian way is being illustrated by means of a brief inquiry of two experts and thus complemented in a more atmospherical way.

Moreover, succeeding and problematic dimensions including the role of ICT and e-learning are balanced and critically reflected. The results are summarized and highlighted with reference to the concept of operative fictions.

### ***Country Specific Backgrounds***

The Austrian system of higher education has a long tradition going back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the University of Vienna has been founded as the first university in the now german speaking countries. Today, in Austria there are 21 universities governed by the Universities Act 2002, the Danube University of Krems (University of Continuing Education), which is governed by the Act on the Danube University of Krems, 19 universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen) regulated by the Fachhochschulen Studies Act of 1993, 9 private universities regulated by the University Accreditation Act of 1999, and 28 teacher training colleges regulated by the Academies Study Act of 1999. Especially the Universities Act 2002 (cf. National Council of the Republic of Austria 2002) which fully took effect in 2004 is of great importance for the implementation of the Bologna objectives as the legal framework. According to this new legal framework the Austrian public universities became autonomous legal entities with full contractual capabilities. They remain largely state-funded, and beginning in 2007 they will get 80% of the overall budget based on performance-oriented triannual contracts between the federal government and each university. The rest of the public funding will be rationed out according to certain indicators.

On the one hand, the Universities Act 2002 opens up spaces for decision making in the context of the implementation of the Bologna objectives on an institutional level. For example, each university is responsible for staffing as well as for phasing out running study-programmes or establishing new study-programmes. On the other hand, the legal framework includes restrictions such as the 6:4-semester structure for bachelor programmes (ECTS 180) and master programmes (ECTS 120) which is in contrast to the flexible openness of the “Bologna philosophy” (e.g. 6:2 or 6:3 semesters).

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<sup>1</sup> By contrast, in our neighboring country Germany publications on country specific details of fundamentals of study structures (Wex 2005), empirical data about the Bologna Process (Schwarz-Hahn / Rehburg 2004) and also critical perspectives of the national union of students (fzs 2005) are available.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.bologna.at>

Furthermore, the Universities Act 2002 breaks with an almost 30-years lasting democratic tradition in which the power of decision-making was almost evenly distributed between professors, scientific assistants and students in many academic areas. The change to a new centralism and the concentration of power to few authorities has different effects in the various Austrian universities.

### *Outline of important steps and developments*

Though, Austria is a small country it has been part of the Bologna Process right from the start. At the beginning, great emphasis has been put on legal aspects. This is reflected in the amendment of the University Studies Act in 1999, the introduction of the Universities Act and the Fachhochschul-Studies Act in 2002. The introduction of bachelor and master programmes, ECTS, diploma supplement, etc. provides the legal basis for the implementation processes. The high value of these processes is demonstrated by the fact that a special nation wide monitoring procedure in higher education has been introduced for the first time in Austrian history. The Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture publishes so-called “monitoring reports” showing its perspective of the implementation of the Bologna-process. So far, two reports have been published.<sup>3</sup> One of them, the “Austrian National Report 2004 – 2005” is available in English, too (cf. Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture 2006). This document answers some standardized questions regarding the state of implementation while at the same time offering a comparison on the international level.

According to this document, about 25% of the study programmes which can be organized<sup>4</sup> in the two-cycle structure are currently following the Bologna system (cf. Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture 2006, p. 4-5). At the moment, the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration is the only Austrian university offering all of its study programmes according to the complete three-cycle structure (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate/PhD). Furthermore, the following steps have been of structural relevance:

- Akin to the European Bologna Follow-up group an Austrian Bologna follow-up group was established in 1999 to “facilitate the flow of information within Austria”.<sup>5</sup> As online described (cf. annotation 5), this group “is - among other things - responsible for the preparation of the Austrian contribution to the European follow-up process and for the elaboration of the Austrian position for the Minister’s conferences. This national board includes the responsible ministries and authorities, as well as representatives of the higher education sector.”
- Along with that group, the Austrian Bologna Contact Point<sup>6</sup> has been set up by the Minister for Education, Science and Culture in order to provide information, counselling and support.
- Concerning the flow of information within the Austrian Higher Education System all Austrian Universities and also the Universities of the Arts have nominated a Bologna Coordinator.<sup>7</sup>
- In the addition to these structural elements a Diploma Supplement<sup>8</sup> has been designed. It follows the model developed by the European Commission, Council of Europe and

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/medienpool/6134/Endversion-Bericht-10-2001.pdf> and [http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/medienpool/12099/bologna-bericht\\_2004.pdf](http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/medienpool/12099/bologna-bericht_2004.pdf) [consulted: 2006-08-18].

<sup>4</sup> There are exceptions such as medicine or study programmes in higher secondary school teaching.

<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/fremdsprachig/en/eu\\_int/bologna/bol\\_followgroup.xml](http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/fremdsprachig/en/eu_int/bologna/bol_followgroup.xml) [consulted: 2006-08-18].

<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/fremdsprachig/en/eu\\_int/bologna/bol\\_contact.xml](http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/fremdsprachig/en/eu_int/bologna/bol_contact.xml) [consulted: 2006-08-18].

<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/fremdsprachig/en/eu\\_int/bologna/bol\\_co\\_uni.xml](http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/fremdsprachig/en/eu_int/bologna/bol_co_uni.xml) [consulted: 2006-08-18].

<sup>8</sup> See [http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/universitaeten/diplomasupplement/DasDiplomaSupplement/Anhang\\_zum\\_Diplom\\_Diplo7746.xml](http://www.bmbwk.gv.at/universitaeten/diplomasupplement/DasDiplomaSupplement/Anhang_zum_Diplom_Diplo7746.xml) [consulted: 2006-08-18].

UNESCO/CEPES aiming at the improvement “of the international ‘transparency’ and fair academic and professional recognition of qualifications” (ibd.).

- Since the beginning of 2004 the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) is active. “The agency’s responsibilities include the development of evaluation standards and procedures, the co-ordination of evaluation of study programmes and institutions as well as the certification of institutional quality assurance processes” (Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture 2006, p. 3). AQA aims at assisting higher education institutions in implementing all relevant quality assurance procedures.

For additional details regarding these aspects of the Austrian way of implementation of the Bologna objectives see the report of the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture (2006)<sup>9</sup>, and also the website [www.bologna.at](http://www.bologna.at).

### ***Experts Voices and Critical Reflections***

In view of the lack of empirical data two experts have been asked to answer a set of questions briefly by email: Mag. Gottfried Bacher, member of the Austrian Contact point, and aulic council Mag. Dr. Klaus Ewald, Bologna Coordinator at the University of Innsbruck.<sup>10</sup> At this point, I am going to concentrate on a few selected aspects.

The two experts put an emphasis on the competence at hand, both, on the structural level with reference to the national Bologna follow-up group and on the personal level due to long experience with legal issues. Looking at the weaknesses we can find questions of responsibility and claims competence. How can the pretensions of the administration concerning the basic structures and forms of implementation brought together with the requirements of professional design of study programmes for which the Senate together with its curricular commissions is responsible? Currently, tensions between scientific needs and requirements, and pretensions of administrative units seem to play an important role in organizational developments.

Another crucial point is the fact that many universities are still working on implementation issues of recent reforms. Some have developed innovative curricula seeing no need for a reform of the reform at the moment. Due to the various speeds of implementation and (lack of) delight with reforms generally, some curricular lags emerged. The answers show clearly, that – apart from the need of clarification of more “technical details” (e.g. ETCS, workload, grading scales) – some representatives are happy with the European developments in higher education whereas other are sceptical in view of the conditions established by the Bologna system.

Last but not least, the question of the role of ICT is answered with a focus on curriculum planning and information policy of administrative units rather than in terms of new forms of learning, transforming knowledge or the role of universities in so called “knowledge societies”. To some extent, the need of improvement is expressed. But critical issues in a more context related way are not reflected. Generally, it seems that in Austria critical considerations about questions of the implementation of the Bologna process are distributed in various discussion groups without having much of an effect on public discourse or the policy of the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture.

Here are some examples of critical issues reflected currently:

- To some extent, the implementation of the Bologna Process is seen as a part of a more general renewal of the Austrian higher education system aiming at a “world class

<sup>9</sup> For some conclusions and recommendations emerging of Bologna Seminar on “Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society” (Salzburg, 3-5 February 2005) see Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture (2005).

<sup>10</sup> The answers arrived on July 13 and August 17, 2006 (Dr. Ewald) (see appendix 1), and Sept. 20, 2006 (Mag. Bacher) (see appendix 2).

level”<sup>11</sup>. There are representatives who consider their institutions as top level institutions. This has been criticized as a self-misunderstanding at least in some cases. Also the general attempt to lift up selected universities in world class leagues on cost of badly equipped mass universities is not concurrent among academics.

- Another issue is referring to implicit understandings of “implementation” and terminological obscurities (e.g. implementing the Bologna Declaration / process / system / goals). The concept of implementation – be it top down or not – often is running contrary to collegial and cooperative processes on the basis of scientific or didactic motivations.
- Furthermore, paradoxical effects are discussed such as the hindrance of mobility in view of shorter study programmes, the fear of less compatibility in light of diversity of the contents and formal structures, the problems of “wide” curricula, for example in studies of languages, when intensive fluency of one language is needed or the high costs for ineffective e-learning systems in the serve of bureaucracy instead of didactical quality. On another level the legal basis of the higher education sector is in conflict with effects of laws granting or prohibiting asylum or social security, or with effects of employment laws.
- The underestimation of costs for the new curricula and the change management as well for students and staff mobility and social aspects (e.g. scholarships).
- The implicit privilege of natural sciences in relation to arts and humanities and the disrespect of different conditions at different faculties including different levels of standardization in diverse fields.
- The constitution of politically motivated barriers between bachelor and master programmes (e.g. “folk studies” for many and social selection by means of high tuition fees on the level of master programmes).
- The convergence of levels of quality in teachings and research of universities and universities of applied sciences.
- Missing calls of “the market” for graduates both on bachelor and master level.

This list could be continued, and, of course, the mentioned critical issues are not reclusively relevant for Austria. The challenges related to them and also to other dimensions may figure in some special ways if we think of the democratic traditions in the Austrian higher education area. In fact, they might be of general importance in the Bologna context. Moreover, unforeseen implications which are not discussed at all currently may play a distinguished role in the future. And old critique of learning by means of character of goods or the commodity character (Warencharakter) of knowledge may turn out to be of new relevance in one way or another.

### ***The Bologna Process – An Operative Fiction?***

Alike in many discourse contexts the Bologna debate is often related with e-learning promises and the notion of the knowledge society. But in many cases e-learning is related to mainly technology driven versions and to traditional models of distributing learning and far less to flexible, dynamic and modern alternatives. The potentials of virtual mobility or microlearning approaches (cf. Gassler 2004, Hug 2005) remain unused quite frequently.

As far as the multitude of available diagnoses of the time and societal self-descriptions are concerned (e.g. information society, knowledge society, media society, communication society, multi-option society, etc.), I regard a one-dimensional diagnostic claim with or without deduced suggestions for therapy as problematic. We had better consider different description perspectives

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.weltklasse-uni.at/>

and their relation and applicability in various contexts. Especially in multi-optional starting positions approaches of the design of cultures of consideration (Blanck 2002, Blanck/Schmidt 2005) are much more likely to open up viable and supporting dynamics of development than casually presented claims about the „true“ state of the social or medial reality.

Leaving aside the shallowbrained use of expressions of diagnoses of the time, i.e. empty words, each description reveals different horizons of reflection and possibilities of contingency processing. Overall we are dealing with an inflation of various catchy self-descriptions of societal trends. Siegfried J. Schmidt uses the term “operative fictions” in this context (Schmidt 2006, p. 4). The expression emphasises the double perspective that on the one hand, such descriptions are essential for the organization of communication processes and on the other hand they are unavoidably fictional. Schmidt regards such operative fictions as reflexive structures and differentiates

“expectations of expectations in the domain of knowledge and insinuations of insinuations in the domain of motivation and intention. When we communicate, we insinuate tacitly that the means of communication we use are being used in a similar way, that the topics we deal with are being interpreted in a similar way etc. We also assume that the intentions to have a conversation are loyal and comparable on both sides. We cannot verify this; this is why I use the term fiction. It is an operative fiction, because without this fiction no language, no communication, no cognition would function. If an operative fiction works, it stays; if it does not work, we need a new one to cope with the failing. This means that there is no point to which we can attach our actions: There is no single reality, single truth or single moral. All of this evolves in processes in which we find ourselves. And all these processes presuppose that we presume similar intentions, experiences and semantics in other people and cultures.”  
(Schmidt 2006, p. 4)

Consequently, dynamic, processual and transversal aspects are dominant in the discussion of sociological diagnoses of the time descriptions. Rather than just presenting facts, claims of facts are presupposed on a trial basis, and then their compatibility is verified. The same goes for descriptions of transformation processes. Here, too, the focus lies on the step-by-step observation of these processes and their conditions rather than on a single diagnosis of transformation that is subsequently insinuated.

In my view, the concept of operative fictions applies to the Bologna Process, too. Promotion of mobility, modular study architecture, autonomous decisions of universities, future oriented e-learning and m-learning concepts, easily readable and comparable degrees, increased employability – these any many more act as keywords in the Bologna discourse. So far, there is no evidence that related goals have been achieved in Austria. The activities and implementation efforts are operating confidently on the basis of a seemingly diagnostic security. The future will show to which extent the action vectoring operative fictions – in retrospective view – will gain the status of facts or will turn out as appropriate concepts.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

For some time the contours of new media societies have become more visible in Europe and elsewhere. This has also highlighted the new role and function the universities have in these new media and knowledge societies. A succeeding Bologna Process must be aware of this situation. The quickly emerging revolutions in the domain of communication and information technologies have advanced to a critical stage: In the next few years we will see which societies and economies will be successful in adopting the new technologies, understanding their dynamics, filling them with life and cultivating humane forms of knowledge and communication. We have learnt that media technology and media economy remain an empty and disoriented machinery without a radically new media and learning culture. Tomorrow’s learning culture, the basis of future living and working, will not emerge from administrative-technical top down measures or

rationalist forms of management. It can only develop slowly from a complex interaction of careful steps of innovation, project oriented practice and differentiated analyses, that is, a process in which society enlightens itself about how new media create new worlds, a process in which universities – knowing their importance – design spaces for gaining and teaching knowledge in a critical-reflexive way rather than sweepingly subjecting them to the principles of commercialisation. It may remain open at this point if and to what extent the Austrian way of implementing the Bologna Process will have been a significant contribution to succeeding developments.

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## **Appendix 1**

Short questionnaire with aulic council Mag. Dr. Klaus Ewald, Bologna Coordinator at the University of Innsbruck

TH: What, in your opinion, are the particularities of the Bologna Process at the University of Innsbruck in comparison with other institutions?

*KE: I cannot compare Innsbruck with other institutions because I don't know how far other Austrian universities have got in implementing these processes. In late autumn this year we are planning a nation-wide meeting and exchange of experiences where we will probably also find out about the state of things.*

TH: Where do you see particular strengths / weaknesses in Innsbruck's way of implementing the process?

*KE: One of the strengths is:*

*That a person (me) was put in charge of these activities who has been working in this institution for 22 years and has been able to gain a lot of experience in a wide range of domains. This concerns especially legal issues concerned with studying, due to my long employment (8 years) in the department of studies, the three-year phase where I worked as a councillor for students from South Tyrol regarding the recognition of their academic degrees and finally through the intensive work on the laws connected with university studies in my dissertation and doctoral thesis. I therefore know very well how the Bologna Process has to be implemented.*

*One of the weaknesses is:*

*Questions of competence allocation between the senate (the organ responsible for the issuing of curricula) and the administration in advising the commissions that are putting together the curricula. On the one hand, the Senate and its curricular commissions bear the responsibility for designing study programmes in line with the Bologna Process, on the other hand the administration has to implement these curricula. The Senate's office lacks specific knowledge in this domain, particularly as far as the details of the Bologna process are concerned.*

*There is a need here to put together our resources.*

TH: Which aspects are particularly beneficial / obstructive for the implementation?

*KE: Some of the staff responsible for this operation has a strong positive feeling towards the European community. They see the Bologna criteria through different eyes than others.*

*There is a certain displeasure that within the space of a short time people have been asked to design yet another new curriculum. This is particularly difficult for those who do not agree with the conditions (established by Bologna) they have to fulfil in the design of the curriculum.*

TH: How well do you think the desired aims will be achieved? (e.g. compatibility, flexibility, internationality of study programmes)

*KE: The majority of the new study programmes will start in the academic year 07/08. The compatibility is guaranteed by the Bologna criteria. The individuality of each study programme in view of the creation of a profile is also guaranteed.*

*The module character of the programmes should make a flexible reaction to changing requirements easy. The internationality of students should be enhanced through the much easier comparison of studying performance (ECTS points). We will see if this is going to be the case.*

*Some of Innsbruck's faculties have an international reputation. Their study programmes are very much sought-after abroad, too.*

*Erasmus-Mundus, an international study programme will also play a certain role in the next few years.*

TH: How important are digital information and communication technologies for the implementation? (e.g. information policy, curricular structures, forms of learning ...)

*KE: Information is passed on via email, materials (transparencies) about information events are downloadable on the website of the Vice-Rector for Teaching and Students, the use of new media is varying. The faculty of Business studies is the forerunner in this aspect.*

## **Appendix 2**

Short questionnaire with Mag. Gottfried Bacher, member of the Austrian Contact Point (Vienna)

TH: What, in your opinion, are the particularities of the Bologna Processes at Austrian Universities in comparison with other institutions?

*GB: It is noticeable that some universities have become forerunners regarding the speed of implementation (e.g. WU Wien (Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration) and BOKU (University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Vienna) when it comes to the introduction of the BA/MA structures, the TU Graz (Technical University Graz) for the ECTS points). These particularities are due to the individual frameworks in each institution.*

TH: Where do you see the particular strengths/weaknesses in the Austrian way of implementing (in comparison with other countries)?

*GB: Strengths: Creation of a national Bologna follow-up group which includes all people concerned in all areas of higher education, the regional governments and the ministry of education. It was very positive that Austria has always been very active in contributing to the European BOFUG, the board and the secretary's work. Although this has not had direct effects on the implementation in Austria, it has at least enabled Austrian comments and opinions to be heard and included in the Bologna task schedule. Weaknesses: Compared with other countries, the Bologna Process was introduced here at a time when many universities were still dealing with the implementation of the Uni-StG 1997 (University Organisation Law of 1997) or were in the middle of other reforms. This led to a situation in which the different institutions reacted very differently to the Bologna goals, as regards both the chronology and the intensity of events. One of the great weaknesses is the application of the ECTS system, which has partly been misinterpreted, especially regarding the calculation of the credits.*

TH: Which aspects are particularly beneficial / obstructive for the implementation?

*GB: Beneficial: Appointing the Bologna coordinators and their counselling visits; national and international information websites with examples of best practice; Bologna managers at all higher education institutions.*

*Obstructive: application of ECTS not unified (using hours per week per semester as a basis for credit allocation instead of basic student workload; grading scale (splitting at random marks, distribution according to percentage); lack of strategies to use available human and financial resources more efficiently/in a more target-oriented way*

TH: How well do you think the desired aims will be achieved in the near future? (e.g. compatibility, flexibility, internationality of study programmes...)

*GB: Due to the fact that many aspects have been implemented in the last 6 years and that the Bologna Process is basically a voluntary process, I believe that we cannot go back and that the achievement of our aims is only a matter of time. 2010 was the original goal but many higher education institutions will need more time, particularly in those countries that joined Bologna at a later point.*

TH: How important are digital information and communication technologies for the implementation? (e.g. information policy, curricular structures, forms of learning ...)

*GB: ICT are particularly relevant, cf. for example Volker Gehmlich's talk (www.bologna.at, ECTS seminar, 12 September 2005), because without the ICT support of credit calculations, of grading scales, of "information packages/course descriptions" or of curriculum planning activities such a comprehensive task would not be possible. Similarly, the transfer of information to the right target groups at the right time is only possible with ICT support, particularly in such a complex process.*