

BOLOGNA: A CHALLENGE FOR BOTH STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC STAFF

by Enric I. Canela*

The 19th of June sees the second anniversary of the signing of the Bologna Declaration by 29 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Holland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom). The Declaration was the embryo of what was to subsequently define the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The objective, in line with other European Union initiatives, was to make Europe the most competitive region in the world in terms of higher education.

The Declaration was born out of an earlier one, the Sorbonne Declaration, signed by Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom, that aimed to promote the harmonisation of European higher education systems. European universities had previously signed a Magna Carta in Bologna in 1988. Currently there are 46 European countries that are signatories of the EHEA convergence process.

In these last ten years there has been a strengthening of the process of the construction of the EHEA, with periodical meetings (Prague, 2001; Bergen, 2005; Berlin, 2003; London, 2007 and Leuven, 2009) of the ministers responsible for education of the signatory countries. Various aspects of the process have taken shape since the original objectives which can be summarised as the following: the adoption of a

system of qualifications that are easily understood and compatible, based on a system of two fundamental levels, the graduate and post-graduate; this is accompanied by the adoption of a system of credits, ECTS, to promote greater mobility in the student population, with the elimination of obstacles to the effective exercise of free exchange.

In spite of the convergence that has occurred between higher education systems in many countries in order to make them compatible, some differences still exist in terms of the duration of courses and the heterogeneity of their education systems.

The majority of states have adopted a model of three years of study in order to gain a degree, with two for a post-graduate award. Meanwhile, some states have ensured flexibility in the



system by allowing three year and four-year degrees to coexist, depending on the specific circumstances.

Only Armenia, Bulgaria, Spain, Greece, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Cyprus have opted for homogenous four-year degrees. This is an error, in my opinion, as they move away from the most competitive countries and a situation that could prove more attractive to students and graduates. Students who complete a three-year degree would not be interested in completing a masters in a country where a post-graduate course only takes one year, which leads to such courses losing their capacity to attract students. These countries will remain somewhat isolated from the other countries in terms of student mobility. Unfortunately, however, with the 2010-2011 academic year about to start, the

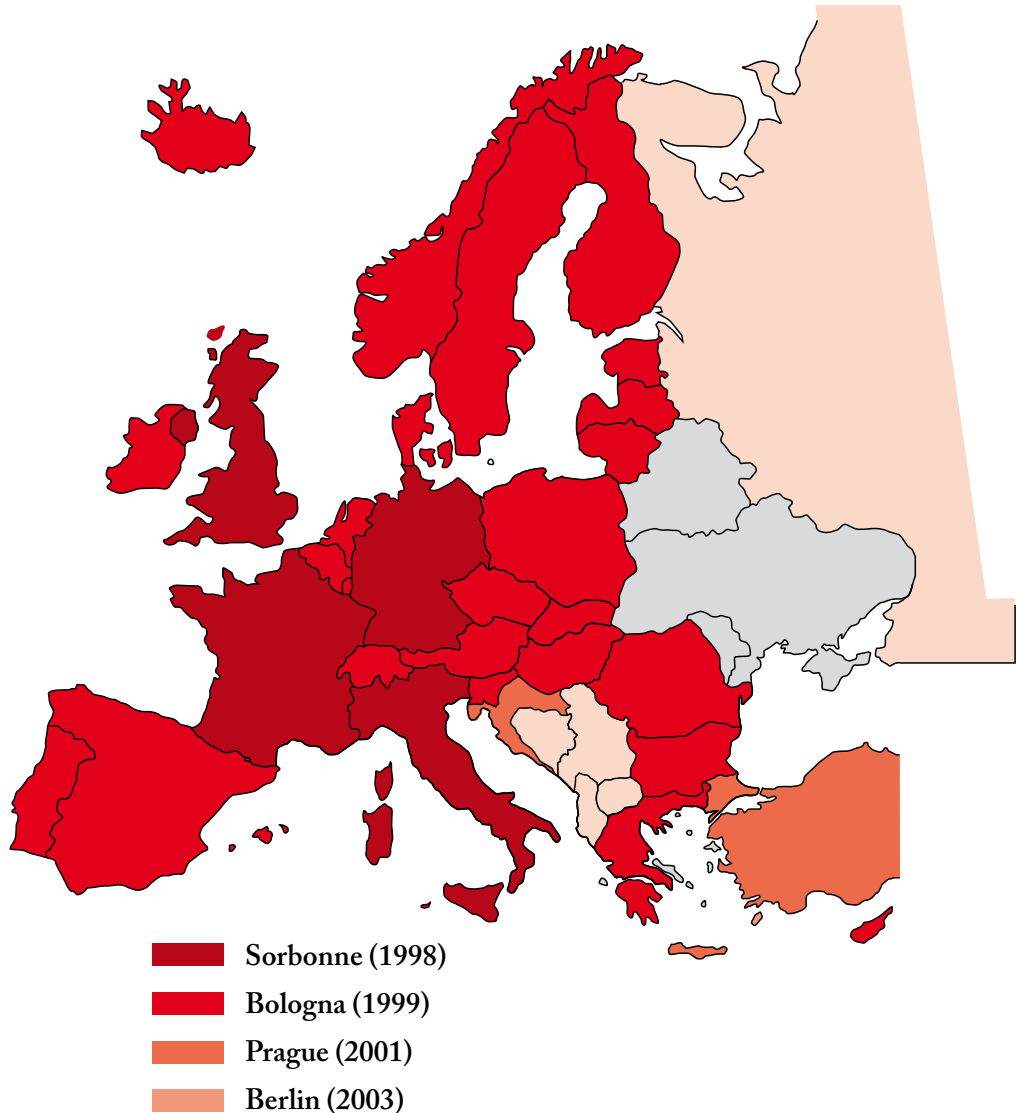
reform process has not finished in many countries. Catalunya is still in an initial adaptation phase. In all probability, in the 2009-2010 academic year, the great majority of courses will be run in accordance with the new graduate and post-graduate model, but many remain for the coming year.

The Chemistry and
Physics Faculties of the
Universitat de Barcelona

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The situation in Catalunya is complicated. The lack of political independence it suffers keeps it tied to an inflexible, homogenising Spanish law that forces it to remain isolated from

Map of the countries participating in the Bologna Process



the more competitive countries. The government of Catalunya decided on three-year degrees, with two-year postgraduate courses, in keeping with all its neighbouring countries and the majority of European countries. Nevertheless, the Spanish government did not settle on this option. The decisive step was the decision to give priority to a convergence with Latin American rather than European Union countries. These are very difficult reasons for Catalunya to understand, with its decidedly

European outlook, without wishing to belittle Latin American relations.

On the other hand, a minority of politically vocal students have been strongly opposing the change and a poor policy of informing people as to the reforms has meant demonstrations have been popular among the majority of students. The messages of commercialisation, privatisation, the coming of business to the university and the adherence to similar slogans have centred

the debate on issues that are removed from the real problems.

The problems that have arisen in Catalunya as a result of the introduction of the new system are different. One is the lack of compatibility with our neighbouring countries. Another is both the students and academic staff lack an adequate culture. The system is centred on what has been termed the transmission method, where students are used to taking notes, studying and sitting exams. There is no tradition of following the student's progress and discussing their work. The lecturer-student relationship is poor. What is more, the students carry out little individual work, something which allows them to combine work and studies, which often demand half a day's work each. This brings us to the third fundamental problem.

In Catalan universities, the students remain longer at university than is necessary, either because they work part-time, or due to a lack of dedication. What is more, a higher proportion of them abandon their studies. The tuition fees are relatively low, while the grant system is not in line with real needs. They are approximately a quarter of the OECD average. As is well known, low tuition fees may not appear to be a barrier to university studies, but students from low-income families are unable to dedicate themselves to study, since they have to find the resources necessary to

maintain themselves or contribute to their upkeep.

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The new system, the reform, that requires the students to dedicate more time to university, will make it difficult for students to combine work and study, at least as they do at present. It is evident that it will be a difficulty for those less economically well off. Without a good system of grants the reform will be a failure.

To conclude. I welcome the reform, in spite of the fact that Catalunya cannot fully integrate itself into the European Higher Education Area until its universities become independent from the Spanish university system. I welcome the reform, in spite of the fact that without a culture change it will prove difficult for it to truly happen. I welcome the reform, in spite of the fact that without a grant and aid system for families, discrimination will exist against certain students for economic reasons.

It is still not too late to deal with many of these issues.

*ENRIC CANELA

(BARCELONA, 1949). HOLDS A CHEMISTRY DEGREE FROM THE AND A PHD IN CHEMISTRY WITH BIOCHEMISTRY AS HIS SPECIALISATION. LECTURER AT THE *Universitat de Barcelona* (UB) SINCE 1974, HE IS PROFESSOR OF BIOCHEMISTRY AND MOLECULAR BIOLOGY AND HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THE SAME NAME IN THE BIOLOGY FACULTY OF THE UB. HE COLLABORATES IN RESEARCH ON INTRACELLULAR COMMUNICATION AND THEORETICAL BIOCHEMISTRY. HE REGULARLY PUBLISHES IN SCIENTIFIC JOURNALS OF INTERNATIONAL RENOWN. BETWEEN 1991 AND 1995 HE WAS VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE CATALAN BIOLOGY SOCIETY. HE HAS BEEN PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY FOR KNOWLEDGE SINCE SEPTEMBER 2007. SINCE JUNE 2007 HE HAS BEEN PATRON OF THE NATIONAL AGENCY FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION (ANECA) FOR THE SPANISH STATE.

