

# THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: AN OPPORTUNITY OR A THREAT TO CATALAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES?

by Sergi Rubió i Pinyol\*

*In general terms, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), also known as the Bologna Process or Bologna Plan, is a framework for European convergence which attempts to establish a coherent system of university qualifications among the participating nations. The intention is clearly one of making European universities more internationally competitive and attractive, promoting the mobility of both students and academics and ensuring that quality and excellence are distinctive hallmarks of our universities.*

The application of this plan implies a large change in both the model of teaching and of learning which are used. This will necessarily entail changing the model of university we have known until now. The objective of Bologna is to guarantee improvements in the quality of higher education by installing a structure of cycles (graduate, masters, post-graduate and doctorate) instead of the diplomas and degrees we are more familiar with. A new credit system will be implemented, thus enabling the efforts and results of all European university students to be measured and compared. This will be known as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Having briefly outlined the intended purpose of the Bologna Process, it must be recognised that, in theory, it appears like a good idea for universities in our country that have become fossilised with a university system from the

1960s. It is logical, therefore, to see the EHEA as a much-needed opportunity to renovate and modernise our centres of higher education.

In order to evaluate whether the application of the EHEA is positive, it is first necessary to evaluate the universities' current situation and how the development of this new framework has progressed.

Public universities in Catalunya suffer from a precarious, endemic situation of debt. In some instances they have run up debts of more than 120 million euros. The reasons behind this situation are complex. On one hand, since self-criticism is necessary, we should admit that some teams of university administrators have managed their resources poorly. However, the major cause of the current situation is, without doubt, the lack of public finance provided for Catalan universi-



ties by consecutive governments of the Spanish state. The universities receive financing that is well below the European average.

Another aspect is that the EHEA generates new needs for universities. Assuming that the possibility of converging with the rest of the European universities could be achieved at no expense is hypocritical, taking into account our starting point and the pedagogical model in force up to now. The new model needs to go hand in hand with an increase in the hiring of academic staff (to provide a personalised review of each student, with continuous assessment of smaller sized groups), a pedagogical renewal in order for both students and staff to adapt to the new model, increased investment in new technologies, the renovation of lecture theatres and the building of new ones, the public provision of language institutes, an increase in grants, both to cov-

er tuition fees and as an aid to mobility, and so on.

The government of the Spanish state has promised on numerous occasions a share of the budget will be made available to confront the changes that have been undertaken due to the adoption of the EHEA. In reality, this has not taken place. Catalan universities are putting the Bologna Process into action without having received the additional financing they were promised.

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**ASSUMING THAT THE POSSIBILITY OF CONVERGING WITH THE REST OF THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES COULD BE ACHIEVED AT NO EXPENSE IS HYPOCRITICAL**

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The problems generated by the application of the EHEA are not exclusively economic or related to its financ-

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Doubts surrounding the Bologna Process have generated uneasiness among students all over Europe

ing. The way in which the process has been put into action has also had many shortcomings.

It is worth stating clearly that every state has full responsibility for organising its own education system and, therefore, the manner in which it chooses to adopt the new model. The European Union has merely limited itself to issuing some directives as to what the EHEA should be, without them being legally binding.

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**A SOLID SYSTEM OF PUBLIC FINANCE WOULD  
GUARANTEE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IS  
OFFERED ON PURELY HUMANISTIC, SOCIAL AND  
SCIENTIFIC GROUNDS**

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In the case of the Spanish state, the manner in which it has gone about adapting university qualifications to the EHEA has been deplorable right from the outset. The reform process was begun late, hurriedly and conducted exclusively from ministerial offices that issued their corresponding Royal Decrees. The process has been conducted with secrecy and without consulting or counting on the participation of the university community who are the principal object of the changes.

In a comparison with the rest of the countries that are carrying out the reform, Spain appears at the bottom of the league table when considering indicators such as the date on which the scheme was adopted, its adherence to proposed deadlines, student participation in the process, changes in the credit system, compatibility and accepting agreements between the old and new systems, modifications in the grant system and so on. Moreover, the Spanish state has opted for the 4+1 model,

whereas the vast majority of European states have opted for the 3+2 (3 years for a graduate course and two for a post-graduate). This option is particularly negative, negating as it does one of the main attractions of the Bologna model, the increased potential for student mobility derived from the standardisation of courses.

Meanwhile the universities have continued to respect the Royal Decrees and orders they receive from the Ministry of Science and Innovation on how they are to prepare the ground for the new university context. None of them have shown any disagreement with the lack of transparency in the process.

The universities, via their governing bodies (chancellor's office, boards of faculties and study councils) attempted to explain what Bologna would mean and attempted to initiate a consultative process and debate within the universities themselves. However, these proved to be completely sterile as none of the contributions by students or academic staff had any impact on the way in which the EHEA was applied.

All of these deficiencies have led to numerous student protests against the Bologna Process, under the slogan 'NO to Bologna'. This call on behalf of part of the student body is entirely legitimate since the process has been carried out very badly. Our opinions have not been taken into account. Nevertheless, such protests no longer make any sense, as the implantation of the EHEA is now a reality. At this stage it is too late for a moratorium on the process. The process cannot be halted because the universities are already carrying out the transition. Now we can only take advantage of the few channels that are still open to us, the students, in order to make ourselves heard.

The 'NO to Bologna' slogan has been the banner under which have gathered those who are generally dissatisfied with the situation in the universities. The slogan has not, however, identified the root of the problems and has not managed to apportion the blame due to the principal actors in the process: the state, the *Generalitat* and the universities. Assuming that blame for all of the universities' problems can be laid at the door of Bologna is naive. The 'NO to Bologna' campaign also encapsulated other problems that had previously existed for some time.

The threat of privatisation of the universities, the introduction of market principles and the elitisation of higher education, along with the loss of autonomy, as outlined by the 'anti-Bologna' lobby, are threats that also existed before the EHEA. As a result, we must be meticulous when it comes to apportioning advantages and disadvantages to the new model.

The EHEA, as it applies to Catalunya in particular, generates a degree of reticence in some of us. The internationalisation of Catalan universities could put at risk the Catalan language, when it is faced with a possible cultural and linguistic homogeneity as part of the convergence process. If this is the case, the *Generalitat de Catalunya* and the universities themselves should be charged with protecting and guaranteeing Catalan's standardisation within this new European framework.

The Bologna Process should be seen as a golden opportunity for Cata-

lan universities. To say 'no' to Bologna would be a 'no' to European convergence and therefore, a mistake. Nevertheless, the adoption of the EHEA could turn out to be a disaster if universities do not have the necessary resources at hand to put it into practice. The lack of financing of Catalan public universities is due to a lack of political will and social priority by central government in Madrid. The situation is aggravated by the fiscal expropriation to which the Catalan Countries are subject on behalf of the Spanish state. The lack of financing is the greatest menace for Catalan universities and the EHEA could further worsen the situation.

A solid system of public finance would allow the employment of more academic staff, the undertaking of the necessary investment for the correct application of the EHEA, the preservation of the autonomy of the university system, while guaranteeing that education and research is offered on purely humanistic, social and scientific grounds. The transfer to the *Generalitat's* hands of a good system of grants that are fair and egalitarian for Catalunya, would guarantee equality of opportunity, the absence of discrimination against students for economic reasons and access to quality, public higher education for all.

If Catalan universities do not have the necessary funding then we indeed should agree with the 'NO to Bologna' campaign and its stance on the ghosts of privatisation, the introduction of market principles and the elitisation of the university system.

\*SERGI RUBIÓ I PINYOL

STUDENT AT THE *Universitat de Barcelona* AND PRESIDENT OF THE FNEC (NATIONAL STUDENT FEDERATION OF CATALUNYA).

