

# BOLOGNA, MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by Antoni Bosch-Domènech\*

*Let me begin with a prediction: the Bologna Process will end up mostly unnoticed. Everything of any importance in the Spanish university system will continue as ever, while some make up will be applied to the sideshows. This is an easy prediction to make because the Spanish/Catalan university system possesses such inertia that changing course requires a strong political will that is not on the radar screen. If you are somewhat nervous about the reform, just imagine the university system as if it were a fully-laden oil tanker. The storm that goes by the name of Bologna will pass and HMS University will continue on its course.*

Having said this, let me now elaborate on some important details. In the first instance, the Bologna proposal was an attempt to standardise European university programmes in terms of the duration of study, with the aim of facilitating the mobility of both students and faculty among countries. Unfortunately, since the aim had its merits, the Spanish Ministry of Education decided Spain should be different. While the majority of European countries agreed that the first university degree would represent three years of study, in Spain it was set at four years. An explanation as to why the Ministry of Education decided to put our students at a distinct disadvantage is by the by. Nevertheless, one can imagine that the usual suspects were behind such a decision.

---

## IF BOLOGNA HAD FOCUSED ON FACILITATING THE INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY OF STUDENTS AND FACULTY, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A GREAT STEP FORWARD

---

A second observation: the pedagogues soon got on the reform bandwagon. We could have done without them, but in our country such experts

seem to have a direct line to the politicians' ear. You only have to look at the plethora of educational reforms in the last twenty years, at all levels and with the results we can see around us. Bologna did not require changing the teaching methodology but in Spain when they do something they do it thoroughly. It is true, and we don't have to hide it, that university education, broadly speaking, has traditionally been a disaster, the result of a tacit agreement between teachers and students: if you don't demand much from me, I won't demand much from you. Obviously, such a strongly rooted culture does not disappear overnight with the enforcement of new teaching methodologies. New methods barely disguise old habits, especially when these methods are more expensive (much more time is required to apply them and therefore more lecturers are needed) and no extra money is available.

Finally, some groups, from young radicals to nostalgic elders, have joined the brawl. The resulting demonstrations would be of little significance were it not for the fact that they have brought to light how the authorities, whether academic or political (with



some exceptions), fail to carry out their responsibilities and permit some forms of behaviour that are unacceptable in a civilised society. This has been especially so in Catalunya.

If Bologna had focussed on facilitating the international mobility of students and faculty, it would have been a great step forward. With a university system that is generally mediocre, it is crucial that students go abroad to study. With a rigid labour market that provides little on-the-job training, it is important that professionals leave and work abroad (many after all end up returning, and they do so better-trained). However, the Bologna reform in Spain wanted to achieve more and has ended up doing less, while showing that the Catalan/Spanish university culture allows little cause for celebration.

Whenever the reform of the Catalan/Spanish university system occurs, it will be the result of a change in incen-

tives, both for faculty and students. As long as the core group of faculty consists of civil servants chosen by a system that is often incestuous and offers a homogenous career structure that fails to distinguish between good researchers/lecturers and bad ones, as long as students receive a significant grant to cover tuition costs, whether they are good or bad students, whether they are able to pay or not (some 90% of the cost of each student is paid directly by the public via taxes), as long as society fails to distinguish between a good faculty/department and a bad one and parents continue to send their offspring to the nearest university rather than to the best, as long as a Ministry of Universities exists that ensures the uniformity of the system, and as long as ignoring the public-private dichotomy continues to be anathema, as long as all these continue unchanged, the reform which goes by the name of Bologna will be nothing more than a shrewd invention to make us waste our time.

\*ANTONI BOSCH-DOMÈNECH

PHD FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AT *Universitat Pompeu Fabra* AND BARCELONA GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS. HIS FIELD OF RESEARCH IS EXPERIMENTAL AND BEHAVIOURAL ECONOMICS. HE HAS WRITTEN ARTICLES FOR *AMERICAN ECONOMIC REVIEW*, *ECONOMIC JOURNAL*, *GAMES AND ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR*, *JOURNAL OF RISK AND UNCERTAINTY*, AMONG OTHERS.

