

# Recent Developments in Student Learning in Britain and their Relationship to de Bologna Declaration

Lewis Elton

University College, London  
l.elton@pcps.ucl.ac.uk

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## Abstract

The article gives an account of recent developments in student-centred learning which are likely to impinge on the appropriateness of the Bologna Declaration and in particular on the relevance of the Declaration to student learning. It is concluded that these developments are neutral regarding the relevance of the Declaration in its present form, but there could be more serious pedagogic problem, in the future. It is possible that the intended harmonisation might harmonise the tangible, but less important, while leaving unharmonised the more intangible, producing unintended consequences in the student learning process.

**Key words:** University Students learning, University, Bolonia Declaration.

**Resum.** *Desenvolupaments recents sobre l'aprenentatge dels estudiants al Regne Unit i la seva relació amb la Declaració de Bolonya*

L'article descriu els desenvolupaments recents en l'aprenentatge centrat en els estudiants que és probable que afectin l'adequació de la Declaració de Bolonya i, en particular, la rellevància d'aquesta declaració de cara als aprenentatges dels estudiants. Hom hi conclou que aquests desenvolupaments són neutrals pel que fa a la declaració en la seva forma actual, però pot presentar-se un problema pedagògic més important en el futur. És possible que la pretesa harmonització pugui harmonitzar les coses tangibles, menys importants, mentre deixi sense harmonitzar les més intangibles, la qual cosa pot provocar conseqüències no volgues en el procés d'aprenentatge dels estudiants.

**Paraules clau:** aprenentatge dels estudiant universitaris, universitat, declaració de Bolonya.

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## Summary

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recent developments in teaching and learning in British universities</li> <li>2. Students and the Bologna Declaration</li> <li>3. Possible effects of the Bologna Declaration on student learning</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Conclusion</li> <li>References</li> </ol> |
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This chapter is in four parts, the first three of which are quite separate but are brought together in the conclusion:

1. Recent developments in teaching and learning in British universities.
2. Students and the Bologna Declaration.
3. Possible effects of the Bologna Declaration on student learning.
4. Conclusion.

Part 1 gives an account of recent developments in student-centred learning which are likely to impinge on the appropriateness of the Bologna Declaration (part 2) and in particular on the relevance of the Declaration to student learning (part 3). It is concluded (part 4) that while these developments are neutral regarding the relevance of the declaration in its present form, that form may become—in the light of the realities of student learning—either only marginally relevant or increasingly relevant for students.

### 1. Recent developments in teaching and learning in British universities

Until recently, university teaching, has not been thought of as a field for research and development—one taught largely as one had been taught. Thus, Ashby (1985), one of the wisest British academics of the past fifty years, wrote at the age of 80:

For many years I taught in universities. Like most academics I assumed that the only qualification I needed was expertise in the discipline I taught (which was biology). It did cross my mind that *how to teach* might be a discipline in its own right, but I never gave it much thought. I marked thousands of examination scripts without examining what the scripts could teach me about my capacity as a teacher and examiner.

This probably still represents the view of the majority of academics in all countries, but there is now a minority—possibly more in Britain than elsewhere—who think differently, and there are now professors, journals, books, conferences and societies that testify to the richness of the field of higher education pedagogy. At the same time, it is doubtful whether the attitudes and practices of the majority have changed—in a situation where external circumstances and internal pressures have changed the student scene out of all recognition, and there is now good evidence (Gibbs and Coffey, 2004) that even a little pedagogic training changes approaches to teaching in a positive way. I therefore consider it legitimate in this chapter to concentrate on changes and developments that have happened in recent years.

In Britain, change largely came about initially through two quite separate developments round about 1970—the establishment of small units on teaching and learning methods at the Universities of London and Surrey, and the start of the Open University (OU). It is difficult to recall now just how revolutionary the approach of the OU was to teaching and to curriculum design,

so much of it has been absorbed into normal practice in admittedly still largely traditional universities. Working in course teams, defining learning objectives in terms of a hierarchy, such as that of Bloom (1956), linking assessment to the achievement of learning objectives rather than to the accumulation of course content, developing learning materials to replace lectures, etc. —all these were first developed empirically at the OU and in due course linked to pedagogical theories, the most influential of which came to be Marton's on deep and surface learning (1984, 1997). Even more significant was the move to student centred learning, which derived from learning theory but was strengthened by a re-interpretation of Humboldt, whose essay on the new University of Berlin (1810, English translation 1970), had over 150 years been instrumental in creating the modern research university, and now came to be seen as equally important for student centred learning and for establishing a scholarship of teaching and learning (Elton, 1986; Boyer, 1990). [This use of the word «scholarship» is barely twenty years old and is still developing a number of different meanings; it links to but is not identical with the German *Wissenschaft* (Elton, 2003a).] Many of the changes were summarised by Biggs (1999) in terms of his principle of constructive alignment, which added the third element —student assessment— to those of teaching and learning. The legitimate importance of assessment in curriculum construction, first recognised by Snyder (1966), led to a challenge to this most traditional aspect of student learning (Knight, 2002; Elton, 2003b) with consequences that are only just beginning to be understood and which may well lead to the abolition of the classified honours degree<sup>1</sup> (Elton, 2004a), that bastion of traditionalism.

One approach, probably more than any other combining the insights acquired over the past thirty years, is problem based learning (PBL), which started in the medical school at McMaster University in Canada (Barrows and Tamblyn, 1980), but in the past ten years has, in Britain as elsewhere, spread to a huge variety of disciplines (Savin-Baden, 2000). It originated in the empirical discovery that medical students learned diagnostic skills better through tackling problems and being led back to the required theoretical knowledge that was needed to solve them, than through the traditional process in which such knowledge is first learned and then applied to problems. This feature is vital in medicine, but it is clearly totally absent in e.g. a course of 18<sup>th</sup> century literature (Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2002), where the value of PBL was found to lie essentially in a combination of student centred learning, group work, negotiated learning objectives and self-assessment.

All these developments in teaching and learning have taken place in an increasingly stressful academic environment, resulting from increases in student numbers, budget cuts and intrusive quality assessment. A particularly

1. This is the Bachelor degree taken by most UK students. It is classified into First, Second and Third, with the Second divided into an Upper and Lower Second.

difficult development has been the extension of higher education to disadvantaged groups, whether socially or ethnically or both. The British Government now expects all universities to have an open access policy which encourages members of these groups to participate in higher education, but in many universities this policy has gone little beyond a recognition that, with the same entry qualification, students from disadvantaged groups have a greater potential than those from privileged groups, so that such students ought to be allowed to enter university with slightly lower entry qualifications. Only a few universities are redesigning their curricula, so as to better meet the needs of disadvantaged students (Archer et al., 2003).

Students also over the past ten years have faced increasing financial difficulties and most students now have part time jobs in term time. This has effectively turned the majority into part-time students, but they are still registered as full-time students and expected to complete their studies in a fixed time, normally three years<sup>2</sup>. Such a strict time limitation is another concept not known in many continental countries or indeed in the United States, where now only about 25% of students complete in the «regulation time» of four years, while the proportion of British students who complete in the regulation three years is of the order of 70%. How this can be possible without lowering standards, when students today have so much less study time than their predecessors, is not clear, but the Quality Assurance Agency has failed to detect any lowering of standards. However, the present situation is likely to favour rich students who can afford not to do paid work while studying!

The effect of new teaching and learning methods on students can be illustrated by a recent experience in an Electronic Engineering degree, where it was decided to change part of it to PBL. The main purpose of the change was to develop the kind of advanced abilities so important for employment and for that reason the change was made in the final year, although this went against all evaluated experience that a radical change to student learning should be introduced at the beginning of a degree course, when students are more open to new ideas. What was found (Mitchell et al., 2004) was that students claimed to have been «spoon-fed», i.e. taught in a predigested manner, until then, so that they found it difficult to change and were very uncertain when faced with anything that required their initiative. Furthermore they expressed opinions such as those in the title —«it's not for lazy students like me...». The lesson is that these changes to teaching and learning are profound and that, if changes so profound are to succeed, they must be based on evaluated experience and good theory.

2. British students are normally not allowed to exceed the prescribed length of their degree course, and students and their institutions are penalised if they take longer!

## 2. Students and the Bologna Declaration

The Bologna Declaration is now about five years old, but there has been remarkably little reaction to its proposals in Britain —by the time that they are put into operation, it will be very difficult to change them in the light of experience. This situation is particularly common in education, where effects are often long delayed and it is desirable to predict and avoid undesirable consequences before they happen, on the basis of some direct evidence, some indirect evidence and some hypothesising (Elton, 1988).

### *The Bologna Declaration*

Within the overall aim of «creating a coherent European higher education space to foster employability and mobility in Europe», the objectives of the Bologna declaration (Haug, 2000), as confirmed in the subsequent Berlin (2003) and Graz (2003) declarations by Ministers, are:

- a) The design of a common framework of reference of easily readable and comparable degrees.
- b) The articulation of studies into undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- c) The generalisation of credit systems compatible with the European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS).
- d) A European dimension in quality assurance and the elimination of obstacles to the mobility of students, teachers and graduates.

While declarations seem to get more and more wordy, it is worthwhile quoting passages from the Berlin declaration which are particularly relevant to students:

As the Bologna Declaration sets out, Ministers asserted that building the European Higher Education Area is a condition for enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of higher education institutions in Europe. They supported the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility (regulations, etc.), and that students are full members of the higher education community.

Ministers strongly encouraged universities and other higher education institutions to take full advantage of existing national legislation and European tools aimed at facilitating academic and professional recognition of course units, degrees and other awards, so that citizens can effectively use their qualifications, competencies and skills throughout the European Higher Education Area.

### *a) Design of a common reference framework of easily readable and comparable degrees*

Universities are independent institutions and they have developed over up to 800 years. Thus it is to be expected that they will differ not only between countries, but within each country. At the same time, much of this development

has been haphazard and uncoordinated. Their extraordinary survival under hugely changing conditions is almost Darwinian and, just as the plant and animal kingdoms, so the universities exhibit a variety that appears to defy reason. Wisely, the creators of the Bologna Declaration knew this and did not try to design a common framework for universities—but merely a common framework of reference aimed at harmonising university courses and qualifications. They might not have attempted even this more limited objective, had it not been for the pressing need in most of Europe to reduce the length of courses in the interest of the economy. Here is Berlin (2003):

Ministers noted with satisfaction that the objective of a degree structure based on two main cycles, articulating higher education in undergraduate and graduate studies, has been tackled and discussed. Some countries have already adopted this structure and several others are considering it with great interest.

However, first degrees in England—but not in Scotland<sup>3</sup>—were already almost uniformly only three years long. This was possible because of the excessive specialisation in English schools, which had effectively resulted in what was normal first year university work in other countries being done in the final two school years and which at this very moment was being challenged in England.

The wish of many continental countries to reduce the lengths of their degree courses and to bring their degree structures closer to the English one resulted in a proposal of 3 + 2 + 2 years, leading respectively to Bachelor, Master and Doctor degrees. While these suit the English situation, they are more problematic elsewhere. As excessive specialisation in schools does not occur in other European countries, the reduction of the first stage to three years may well be unwise and it also goes against current practice in some countries which make the Master level the first qualification; however, elasticity which allows the length of the first degree to be three to four years rather than precisely three, may be able to cope with this problem. More serious difficulties may arise from two ways in which Britain differs from the continent—the introduction of differential student fees (see e.g. Goddard, 2004) and the way that universities are unprotected in law against Government financial pressures (Elton and Lucas, 2004).

As far as students are concerned, a huge opportunity to adapt British degrees to modern times has so far been missed, for students might well have put the highest priority to the relaxation of the two current constraints, mentioned above—the rigid enforcement of the length of the first degree and the distinction between full-time and part-time students.

3. At present, the situation in Wales and in Northern Ireland is sufficiently similar to that in England for considerations which apply to England to apply equally to Wales and in Northern Ireland. With devolution and the transfer of power to the regions, this may change.

*b) The articulation of studies into undergraduate and postgraduate levels*

The articulation into three levels —bachelor, master and doctor — is very close to the existing situation in Britain and the main difficulty is likely to be that at present there are two kinds of Master's degree and two kinds of Doctor's degree. In the case of the Master, there is the one year taught course, such as the MA and MSc, which is a continuation of the Bachelor degree, and there is the MPhil which is a two year research degree and often preparation for and the first part of a PhD. Similarly, in addition to the PhD which traditionally is wholly based on research, there is now also a so called «taught» doctorate<sup>4</sup>. Conceptually and in form, these two kinds of Master's and Doctor's degrees are so different from each other that to give them the same title is seriously misleading. So perhaps the one obstacle in Britain to the articulation into undergraduate and postgraduate degrees is one of inappropriate existing nomenclature!

*c) The generalisation of credit systems compatible with the European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS)*

The proposed structured scheme would be meaningless, if there was not something beyond a title that was to be common, and an obvious solution was to make the standards of each of the stages comparable for the whole of Europe and across disciplines. Thus Berlin (2003):

Ministers emphasized that for greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes the adoption of common cornerstones of qualifications, supported by a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation functions, is necessary.

The ECTS scheme attempts to do that, but the meaning of such an essentially content and process free harmonisation remains in doubt. Is it really possible for degrees of, say, in history to be of the same standard everywhere; or —even more difficult— can the standard of a history degree be demonstrated as equal to that of, say, a physics degree; or —possibly most difficult— can traditional courses, taught largely through lectures and assessed through formal examinations, be meaningfully compared with modern courses, which may comprise student centred learning, group work, negotiated learning objectives and self-assessment?

There are two precedents, and much can be learned from them. The first is the American credit scheme, where broadly speaking within each university a first degree course is made up of parts, each of which has a credit rating, based on its length, usually measured in terms of its number of lectures and classes, and —sometimes but not always— on the year in which it is taken. The main purpose of this scheme has always been the desire to allow students

4. A «taught» PhD includes a large component of taught material and a much smaller research component than the normal PhD.

in each university to organise their courses flexibly within the totality of credits for a degree. The purpose has never been either to make courses in one discipline equivalent in difficulty to those in other disciplines in the same university or to make courses in one discipline equivalent to courses in the same discipline in other universities.

The second precedent is the British credit system —more relevant now because it is this system which is to be adapted for Europe through the ECTS system. It determines the credit rating of a course in terms of the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a programme, objectives preferably specified in terms of learning outcomes and required competences at specified levels. The difference —and it is huge— between the American and British credit systems is that credit ratings in the former can be numerically calculated and are not automatically transferable, while in the latter they require judgment, even if in the end the judgment is turned into numbers, but in theory can then be automatically transferable between institutions. When this system was first developed in Britain it met with very limited success and is now used mainly for sub-degree qualifications; whether it can be more successful in Europe remains to be seen.

*d) A European dimension in quality assurance and the elimination of obstacles to the mobility of students, teachers and graduates*

The most important issue in quality assurance is whether quality is to be based on the outcomes of a programme of study, as is the case in Britain —even if it may be very difficult and often impossible to state these meaningfully— or on its nominal length, which is still the case in some continental schemes. As outcomes achieved at least in principle can constitute a common currency, this is clearly to be preferred and may allow Britain to demonstrate the greater efficiency of its shorter courses. However, the details of different quality regimes lead to very different consequences and the comparative rigidity of the British scheme and its close relationship to the idea of academic «league tables» are matters which it may be hoped will be modified through any attempt at achieving «European quality assurance». Here is a statement from Trends III which supported Berlin (2003):

The primary function of quality assurance [...] consists in quality improvement. Only in France, Slovakia and the UK, accountability to society is mentioned more frequently than quality improvement.

This is over-kind to the UK, where quality improvement has not been explicitly on the agenda of the Quality Assurance Agency. Furthermore Berlin (2003) emphasised «the necessity of close European cooperation and mutual trust in and acceptance of national quality assurance systems», while trust quite generally is largely absent in the present British scheme (Elton, 2004b). One way to make progress in the UK might be to divorce the concept of quality assurance from that of accreditation, as has been advocated by the National



Union of Students in Europe (ESIB, 2000). In this paper, which deserves close reading, a clear distinction is made between quality assurance which is «an ongoing process that ensures the delivery of agreed standards» and accreditation, which «provides public certification of acceptable quality». For quality assurance, the European dimension should be to achieve transparency of different national quality assurance systems, not to replace them, while —particularly in the interests of student and graduate mobility— a European Declaration on methods for accreditation should be made between different systems of quality assurance. For British students, mobility is likely to be less restricted by regulations than by British attitudes to the learning of foreign languages, which recently has been made optional in the secondary school curriculum!

### *British reactions to the Bologna Declaration*

To sum up the current attitudes in Britain to the Bologna Declaration: although officially it has university support (Universities UK, 2003), it is fair to say that the majority in higher education are hardly aware of it and, if they are, they see it largely as a bureaucratic threat [but see e.g. Caie (2002) for a cautiously welcoming response]. This is most unfortunate, as it prevents Britain from playing a constructive role in something that will certainly come and increasingly affect all European higher education.

### *Public policy considerations*

This last point leads into wider considerations, beyond those which are primarily pedagogical, particularly those concerned with public policy (Corbett 2003a, b). Crucially, she points out that while «for some it may seem a threat to what Becher and Kogan have called the “academic base” of the university, to others—including governments, employers, vice-chancellors and students—it is an opportunity». She argues convincingly that the Bologna process may be a positive influence on conditions for creative academic work and for intellectual autonomy and raises two questions:

1. Are academic freedoms likely to be more or less constrained by the Bologna process?
2. Is ignoring the Bologna process politically realistic?

Her responses are:

- Europeanisation of domestic policy is far from the «one size fits all» suggested by critics of the Bologna Process, and a fruitful line of research is to pursue the creation of policy and policy norms.
- Such European ventures as the European University and the Erasmus programme show that universities and the EC institutions have had conflict-

ing visions of what European means. Where these visions can be accommodated within a consensual decision —accounting for the ambiguities— the power of an idea has been matched by agreement on the mechanism for making the policy idea operational and its consistency with the larger Community project.

— There is a case for saying that as the Bologna Process has evolved, it has become more university —friendly.

From the point of view of this paper, the important conclusion can be drawn that the Bologna process may cause tensions between academics —who see their academic freedom curtailed— and almost everyone else concerned with universities —governments, employers, vice-chancellors and students.

### 3. Possible effects of the Bologna Declaration on student learning

I now turn to possible «Bologna» effects on student learning through a study which compared the views of British and German graduates to their university experience some five years after graduation (Johnston and Elton, 2005). Although these graduates had not been influenced by Bologna considerations, their tales may give an indication of what the effect of the Bologna Declaration might be.

As has been argued, the Declaration aims at harmonising European university degree courses through a common framework of reference of easily comparable degrees and the generalisation of compatible credit systems, based essentially on the contents and levels of degree offerings. In contrast, 1) and 2) below indicate differences between the experiences of British and German students —experiences which in different ways are likely to exist between any two European countries— which raise issues beyond simple differences in content and level. They raise further inherent points, listed as 3) and 4). Because of the tentative nature of these conclusions, these points are raised as questions:

- 1) Both German and British graduates talk about «independence», but they clearly have different understandings of what this means. German «independence» appears to relate more to students being left to themselves and either sinking or swimming, whereas in Britain, «independence» is seen as a guided development throughout a degree course. In another study (Brennan et al., 2001), although both British and German graduates put «Development of your personality» as most important in their studies, there was regrettably no attempt to differentiate what that phrase meant in the two countries. More generally, students in both countries seemed more influenced by their learning milieus, which were very different, than by the content of their courses, and this may be increasingly so in the light of the differences arising from the British move to student centred learning. *If such findings prove valid, what do they say about the comparability of their*

*respective degrees? And, even within a single —in this case the British— system, will there be any way to demonstrate differences arising from the radical change from teacher centred to student centred learning which has taken place in Britain recently?*

- 2) British students must in general choose their courses before starting them; German students choose them in their first or even second years of study. *What are the effects of the differences in age, personal development, the nature of «independence» in each country, professional formation, relationship between higher education and employment, the role of subject knowledge, all of which come out of the study?*
- 3) British students finish their studies after three to four years, while German ones start about a year later and —certainly at present— study much longer. Hence British graduates enter the economy some 3-4 years earlier than German ones. *Does the fact that German graduates reach the labour market at a later age —which is likely to continue to be so under the Bologna Declaration— compared to British graduates, make it difficult to compare the graduates emerging from the system?*
- 4) The German concept of «Bildung» (inadequately translated as «general education») is all pervasive in German culture. Although expertise and specialist knowledge are valued much more now than in the past in both Germany and Britain, underlying values which are deeply enshrined in history still differ. This leads to different practices which may only bear a superficial resemblance. *How does this difference affect the education of German and British students and will this difference become apparent through the Bologna process?*

#### 4. Conclusion

This chapter started with an account of recent changes in the learning experience of British students, through both pedagogic and economic changes. Their combined effect is beginning to be profound and is likely to be more so in the future. How far these changes were perceived and taken into account by those who produced the Bologna Declaration is not clear, but all the indications are that the Declaration was designed with an intention of being sufficiently flexible to allow for whatever changes there might be in different systems and countries. But there is a more serious pedagogic problem. As was indicated in the third section of this chapter, there are likely to be real differences between apparently equal offerings, differences which cannot be related to differences in content and levels. In sum, it is possible that the intended harmonisation might harmonise the tangible but less important, while leaving unharmonised the more important but intangible. That university education overall would remain essentially different in different countries under Bologna could be a real strength in that it could lead to different countries learning from each other; that the Bologna Declaration could have a negative and constraining influence on the curriculum would be an unintended consequence. By the

time it happened it would be too late for change. If the Bologna process develops a political life of its own, it may become bureaucratic in its attempt at unifying what is disparate through agreement of what may be largely apparent rather than real. If that happens, then everyone will suffer, certainly academics and students, and probably even Vice-Chancellors, employers and Governments. It need not be so; let us hope that it will not.

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