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The European Higher Education Area: An Interesting Opportunity to Contribute to Global Advancement

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Abstract: Universidad Europea de Madrid, along with other universities and the support of the Agency for Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Prospects for the Community of Madrid (ACAP– Agencia de Calidad, Acreditación y Prospectiva de las Universidades de Madrid), developed a tool to measure progress in the construction of the European Higher Education Area. In addition to being able to determine the level of adoption of the Bologna principles, it became an essential tool for the improvement of quality throughout the University.

Keywords: European Higher Education Area, EHEA, Bologna Process, accreditation

Background

In 1999, the European Ministers of Education, with the aim of promoting the economic development advancement and social well-being of the European Union, convened in Bologna and drew up a joint declaration fundamentally intended to create an education system capable of responding more effectively to the needs of society, particularly within the labor market. A series of goals were therefore established for the following ten years, giving way by 2012, to a new foundation to higher education in Europe known as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Specifically, the original goals were:

- To adopt a system of comparable degrees based on three main cycles: Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate.
- To establish a system of transferable credits -the European Credit Transfer System or ECTS- which acknowledges the real workload of the student, thus increasing transparency, collaboration among universities and international mobility.
- To issue the so-called European Diploma Supplement: a standardized document that includes students' academic records and the qualifications.
- To promote a European dimension in higher education, with a special focus on quality as measured through standardized criteria and methodologies.
- To promote the mobility of students, researchers and faculty.

From that moment forward, a work agenda started to take shape. It began with the ratification of the Bologna Declaration (1999), and later established priorities for action and broadened the contract's original content, covering topics of great relevance, such as life-long learning, quality assurance systems, degree accreditation and periods of study.

Throughout the ten years of development of the Bologna process, or creation of the EHEA, active participation from universities and students was encouraged and the number of countries that adhered to the treaty grew to 46. Governments modified their laws, at their own pace, and many universities put communication plans and faculty training programs into place, as well as EHEA adaptation pilot programs with the purpose of slowly introducing some of the core elements of

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the new educational scheme. These include: the ECTS credit as an academic unit of measure, student advising and guidance programs, the use of active methodologies, etc.

One of the greatest boosts to the reform process came from the Tuning Project (2000), which was financed by the European Union within the Socrates program and included the participation of all European countries. The Tuning project, gathered information from graduates, employers and academics allowing for a definition of learning outcomes and degree-specific competences of those programs included in the study. One of the fundamental conclusions of this project and several other similar initiatives is the need for development in competences, to instil skills and knowledge in our students that go beyond purely technical aspects. Specifically, as a result of the Tuning Project, a group of 30 generic competencies that every college graduate should acquire was established in greater or less measure depending on their choice of studies:

Table 1. *Generic Competencies That Every College Graduate Should Acquire*

Generic Competences	
1. Ability for abstract and analytical thinking, and synthesis of ideas	16. Ability to make reasoned decisions
2. Ability to apply knowledge in practical situations	17. Ability to work in a team
3. Ability to plan and manage time	18. Interpersonal skills
4. Knowledge and understanding of the subject area	19. Leadership skills
5. Knowledge and understanding of the profession in practice	20. Ability to work in an interdisciplinary team
6. Ability to communicate both orally and through the written work in first language	21. Ability to communicate key information from one's discipline or field to non-experts
7. Ability to communicate in a second language	22. Appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism
8. Ability to use information and communications technologies	23. Ability to work in an international context
9. Ability to undertake research at an appropriate level	24. Knowledge of foreign cultures and traditions
10. Capacity to learn and stay up-to-date with learning	25. Ability to work autonomously
11. Ability to search for, process and analyse information from a variety of sources	26. Ability to design and manage projects
12. Ability to be critical and self-critical	27. Initiative and entrepreneurship
13. Ability to adapt to and act in new situations and cope under pressure	28. Ethical commitment
14. Capacity to generate new ideas (creativity)	29. Concern for quality
15. Ability to identify, pose and resolve problems	30. Motivation to achieve

Beyond the formal and legislative changes brought about by the EHEA, the main challenge is the idea of offering college students a holistic education that effectively prepares them to become successful professionals and citizens for the future society. The redefinition of Higher Education's goals as assumed by the convergence process requires a profound change in the educational approach formerly used in most universities:

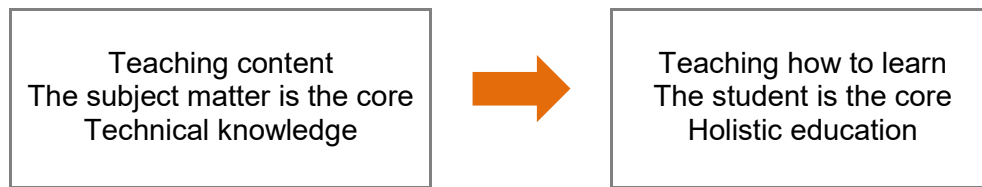


Figure 1. Redefinition of Higher Education's goals as assumed by the convergence process.

This new conceptualization assumes that students have to acquire learning that includes not only specific knowledge in their field, but also a great many abilities and skills that cannot be developed if the faculty teaches exclusively using a traditional method.

The effective acquisition of the numerous competencies that define each degree require the student to *learn through doing*. It would be impossible to guarantee that students will learn to communicate if there is no space in the teaching that allows them to present projects or prepare reports. Students will not learn to plan if teachers are the only ones doing the planning. They will not learn to select, manage and incorporate information if they never refer to sources other than hand-written notes and text books.

In order to incorporate these concepts properly, in addition to several other new elements in college teaching, it is necessary to learn other teaching techniques. No doubt this approach contrasts with the traditional practice of many European professors, for whom the traditional lecture has been the only way to teach.

To summarize, the adoption of the philosophy stated by the EHEA implies many changes in the traditional behavior of many teachers and students:

For the Teacher

The traditional teaching method -the lecture- will be partly replaced by sessions where there is more participation from the students, making use of the aforementioned active methodologies. In addition, the teacher must devote some time to follow up and student support. It no longer involves only thinking about the course itself; it is now about making sure students learn. The assessment will have to adapt to the new teaching practices and objectives:

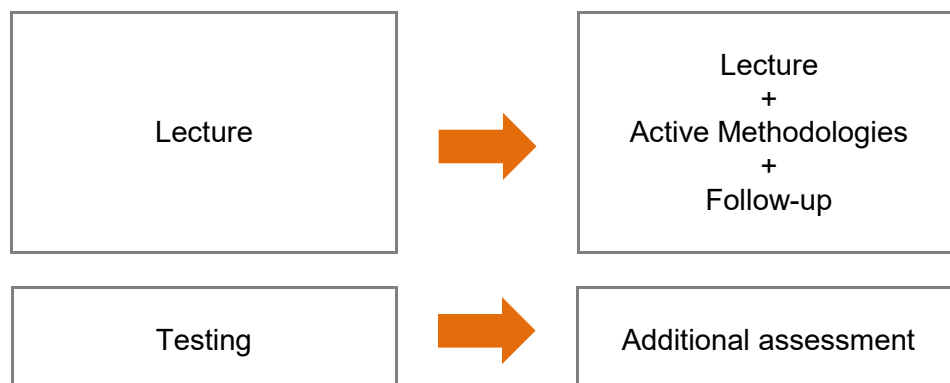
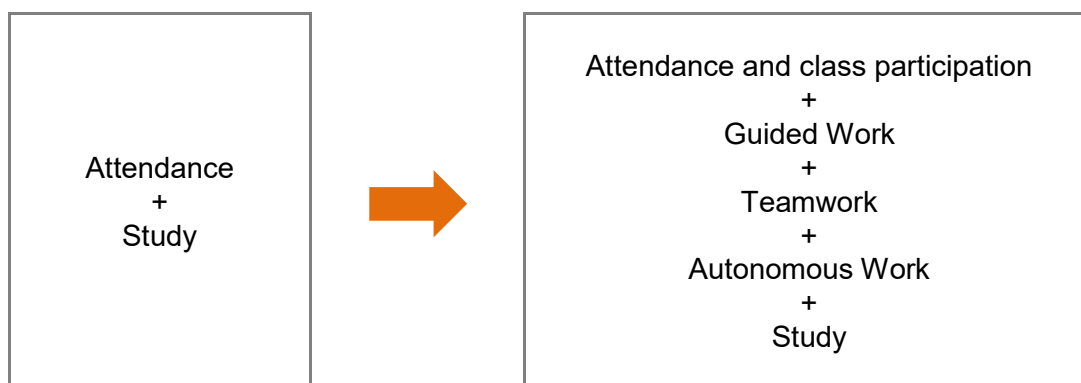


Figure 2. Assessments have to adapt to the new teaching practices and objectives.

For Students

Going to class will no longer entail a passive approach such as taking notes to later study in a more or less logical way. Students will now attend class to participate in tasks that will allow them to learn more. They will need to search and integrate information. In addition to studying, they will have to work in teams, plan, present results, and make decisions. Much of their learning will be autonomous and they need to be aware that all of this is not extra work. They will have to realize that this is a necessary part of their learning in order to pass the course, as it is the only way to obtain the desired results in their holistic learning.



A few years and a will to change -especially on the part of teachers- will be required in order for these roles to be fully assumed by both faculty and students. Numerous experts point out that this is one of the most critical issues for the new European educational principles to succeed.

In Practice

The development of the Bologna Process has brought profound changes to the organization and approach in many universities. Universidad Europea de Madrid began its adaptation plan in 2003, implementing actions such as:

- Communication plans for faculty and students.
- Change to course schedules to assure adequate time allocation focused on teaching.
- Remodeling tutorial rooms and classrooms as needed.
- Education and training programs for faculty (such as active methodologies, alternative assessment methods, student follow-up and teaching technologies).
- Education programs for students to develop competences (planning, teamwork and public speaking).
- Creation of a documentation, information and advising center.

Universidad Europea de Madrid, along with other universities and the support of the Agency for Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Prospects for the Community of Madrid (ACAP–*Agencia de Calidad, Acreditación y Prospectiva de las Universidades de Madrid*), developed a tool to measure progress in the construction of the European Higher Education Area. In addition

to being able to determine the level of adoption of the Bologna principles, it became an essential tool for the improvement of quality throughout the university. Specifically, the NACE tool (*Nivel de Adopción de la Convergencia Europea* – Adoption Level for European Convergence) considers:

- The level of transparency of an institution's information -an essential part of institutional "good governance"- is the foundation of comparability studies and promotion of mobility.
- The adaptation of a degree structure to the European graduate/post-graduate plan.
- Promoting its international nature, in regard to mobility both for the student and faculty, through entry and exit programs in both cases.
- The degree in which students and their educational needs are met are the core of the universities' activities.
- The degree in which the faculty actually responds to students' and societal needs, making use of adequate teaching methods and their preparation.
- The degree in which institutions respond to societal needs, fundamentally by educating students that are adequately prepared, in order to cover the demands of the labor market and responsible and committed citizenship.
- Facilities and other material resources adapted to students' educational needs.
- And finally, the existence of a set of institutional parameters to measure quality and continuous improvement that reinforce the above.

The NACE tool is built from the detailed assessment of each of the eight aspects mentioned. The global assessment (between 0 and 100 points) is weighted as follows: Transparency (15%), Degree Structure (15%), Internationality (10%), Student-centered focus (15%), Societal-focus (15%), Material Resources (10%) and Quality Assurance (15%). The application of the NACE tool in Higher Education institutions allows them to make a simple diagnosis of the development level of each of the aforementioned elements, an interesting foundation to plan and establish priorities within the EHEA.

Once approved by Spanish law, the development and application of this tool, along with the rest of the actions mentioned above, allowed Universidad Europea de Madrid to thoroughly prepare to launch new Master programs (previously non-existent) and transform all the existing Bachelor degrees into compliant degrees. In 2008, it was the first Spanish private university to take on Bologna's great challenge.

Conclusions

Throughout the 10 years of the EHEA's existence, numerous follow-up reports have been created that show the partial achievements of the process. Noteworthy reports include those in *Trends*, by the European University Association (EUA) and those from *Bologna with student eyes* and *Bologna at the finish line*, by the European Student's Union (ESU). The report *Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010: The impact of the Bologna Process* (Eurydice, 2010), is a good example of the achievements of the Bologna Process, with special detail placed on the structure of higher education in different European countries.

In summary, the Trends 2012 report offers a positive evaluation of the changes brought about by the EHEA implementation. The Bachelor, Master and Doctorate degree structures are now widespread. Comparability of university degrees has clearly increased and a standard credit system (ECTS) is used in practically all countries. Students' experiences have improved and the focus on graduate employment opportunities has increased. Almost all countries have quality agencies with jurisdiction over control and continuous system improvement, which strive to reach the recommendations of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (developed by ENQA). International mobility has also increased, but there are still obstacles such as accreditation, differences in academic calendars or language barriers that complicate its full execution. Degree flexibility and modularity, as well as the life-long learning (LLL) experience and the link with the European Research Area, are also great challenges that Europe must address more efficiently going forward.

Surely, all the effort put in by governments and universities has translated into an outstanding impulse to the benefit of progress. Let's hope that the 2020 European Strategy continues to be an unending road towards progress for European and global higher education.

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