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Opening of higher education? A lifelong learning perspective on the Bologna process

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WZB

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Opening of Higher Education? A Lifelong Learning Perspective on the Bologna Process.

discussion paper

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Abstract

Since 1999, European education ministers have discussed and further implemented the 'Bologna process', a wide-ranging framework for the reform of higher education. Lifelong learning was added as a goal of the process in 2001. This article evaluates the extent to which the development of lifelong learning has progressed and examines whether the Bologna process has facilitated lifelong learning opportunities in a sample of countries. The evaluation of legislative instruments and policy positions of different stakeholders in Germany, France, Italy and the UK shows that countries link quite different strategies to lifelong learning in higher education. Specific national approaches exist which facilitate or restrict its development. Thus far, the impact of the Bologna process on this issue has been modest. The process has mainly had an impact on the discussion regarding lifelong learning, not necessarily whether and how such policies and programs are implemented.

Zusammenfassung

Im Jahr 1999 begannen die europäischen Bildungsminister mit dem ‚Bologna Prozess' eine weit reichende Hochschulreform. Als eines der Reformziele wurde 2001 ‚Lebenslanges Lernen' hinzugefügt. Dieser Beitrag untersucht anhand von vier Länderstudien (Deutschland, Frankreich, Italien und UK), inwiefern es gelungen ist, dieses Ziel umzusetzen und ob der Bologna Prozess neue Möglichkeiten lebenslangen Lernens an Hochschulen geschaffen hat. Dabei zeigt die Analyse von Gesetzen und Regularien, aber auch die Betrachtung politischer Positionen wichtiger Stakeholder, dass die einzelnen Länder sehr unterschiedliche Strategien mit lebenslangem Lernen an der Hochschule verbinden. Spezifische nationale Ansätze werden deutlich, die die Entwicklung dieses Ziels fördern oder behindern. Insgesamt wird deutlich, dass der Bologna Prozess vor allem die Diskussion um lebenslanges Lernen an der Hochschule gefördert hat, und nicht notwendigerweise, ob und wie dieses Ziel umgesetzt wird.

Contents

I. Introduction **1**

II. World Society: The Theoretical Perspective of New Institutionalism **2**

III. Methods and Data **4**

IV. European Education Policy **5**

V. Lifelong Learning Dimensions in the Bologna Process **7**

VI. Analyzing the Bologna Initiators: **9**

Germany 9

France 12

Italy 14

United Kingdom 17

VII. Conclusions **20**

VIII. References **22**

I. Introduction*

Since 1999, the Bologna process[1] has shaped European higher education policy. Among its goals is the establishment of lifelong learning in higher education. It can be said that Bologna started an unprecedented intense reform of European higher education: Many signatory countries reformed their policy with clear reference to the goals and tools envisaged in the declarations, and scholars regard this process as a step towards convergence in European higher education systems (Hackl 2001). Lifelong learning, however, seems to be a priority only in some countries (Lourtie 2001: 2,18; London Communiqué 2007).

Focusing on four country studies, this paper evaluates the extent to which lifelong learning has progressed and whether Bologna has facilitated lifelong learning opportunities. We argue from a new institutionalist perspective that sees international debates influencing national practices, according to which Bologna should deliver a common model for reforming national higher education systems in line with principles of lifelong learning. To examine the impact of this process, we analyze three different levels: European discussions, national political activity and individual participation rates in learning. Our strategy is to focus on those four countries that have initiated Bologna – Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom (UK) – because these should show the greatest interest in implementing its goals and, moreover, had more time to do so. Given that one of the innovative features of this political process is the participation of different actors (governments, academic institutions, students and international organizations), this paper also includes non-governmental actors as rectors' and students' organizations. Such are traditionally neglected in much research, but have recently gained importance due to their official participation in Bologna.

The text is structured along the following lines: We first introduce our theoretical background and then present the European level of education policy making and the development of lifelong learning in the Bologna Process. In a further step, we analyze how this discussion is reflected in the national debates in Germany, France, Italy and the UK and whether individual participation in lifelong learning has progressed. Finally, we evaluate our findings against the theoretical expectations and outline further areas of research.

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1 Hereafter referred to as 'Bologna'.

II. World Society: The Theoretical Perspective of New Institutionalism

Since the launch of Bologna, two interlinked issues attract attention: First, European guidelines on designing higher education systems have explicitly been interwoven with national policy making, which also included the emergence of new actors. Second, the actual content of the reforms, which partly involved wide-ranging changes to many higher education systems. The theoretical background of new institutionalism, a body of theory developed in the context of the so-called Stanford School, is particularly well-suited to deal with both of these developments: Research in that context focuses in particular on the processes and impact of worldwide diffusion concerning specific educational or societal ideas (e.g. Meyer et al. 1997, Finnemore 1993).

New institutionalism has underlined that the international community delivers ideas and role models for national policy-makers and societies (Meyer et al. 1997). Through exchange among the states and in civil society, ideas are diffused widely and subsequently find their way into national policy-papers and daily life. In this context, international organizations – both governmental and non-governmental – are particularly important (see e.g. Finnemore 1996) because they influence national policy development by diffusing policy ideas. In the context of education, their main instruments are exchange of information, charters and constitutions, standard setting instruments and technical and financial resources (McNeely and Cha 1994). For example, despite not having any hard instruments at hand, UN meetings are a celebration of world cultural principles that lead to the wide dissemination of the organization's policy ideas (Lechner and Boli 2005). Moreover, through technical and financial resources, international governmental organizations (IGOs) can stimulate and support the implementation of their ideas in the countries. Being a supranational organization, the European Union (EU) principally has additional and stronger means at hand to stimulate policy change. However, its most successful education policy initiatives are soft mechanisms, e.g. coordination (Martens et al. 2004; Weymann et al. 2007).

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are important for the establishment of world cultural principles, too: They range from local initiatives, stakeholder organizations such as students' or rectors' associations, to large organizations as amnesty international. Following new institutionalism, NGOs are concerned with 'enacting, codifying, modifying, and propagating world-cultural structures and principles' (Boli and Thomas 1999: 19). Their aims and ways of influence are complex: On the one hand, they influence local daily practices, e.g. as watchdogs or through the implementation of projects that are perhaps even initiated by governmental organizations. On the other hand, NGOs partly have strong linkages to the UN and other international organizations. They lobby for their specific aims and provide information on these issues

(Martens 2005). Moreover, NGO activity can lead to the founding of new governmental organizations or, the reverse, the activity of governmental organizations legitimizes NGO founding or activity in the respective realm (Boli and Thomas 1999: 29). Such activities and interactions can be observed in the case of the 'European Student Convention' which European student organizations established in preparation for the Bologna meetings.

Both governmental and nongovernmental organizations take up ideas discussed in global forums, try to adapt them to their members or their environment and thus diffuse world cultural principles through their activities. The diffusion and establishment of education as a central value in modern societies is a prominent example of such processes, which often took place irrespectively of societal history and national culture (Meyer and Ramirez 2005). Yet, the reception of global institutions in the countries is also influenced by national premises, i.e. some countries tend to take up such ideas more easily than others or have more resources to do so (Meyer et al. 1997: 144-5).

Lifelong learning has become such a widespread international idea as well (see e.g. Schuetze and Casey 2006, in particular Schuetze 2006). Lifelong learning today, regardless of the variety of its practical implementations, denotes the aim to expand education over the individual life span. Thus, 'while education is an institution in modern society, lifelong learning is in some way "education squared", because the expectations linked to education in the early years are now enlarged and projected over the whole life span' (Jakobi 2006: 130). While higher education was, for a long time, separated from the lifelong learning discourse that focused on vocational qualifications and professional skills, recent developments align higher education as an additional form of professional qualification. Such endeavours have been supported by Bologna, and the Bergen Communiqué (2005) explicitly mentions the chance to further implement lifelong learning in higher education through qualification frameworks.

Although most of new institutionalist studies are concerned with formal learning, as schooling or higher education (e.g. Meyer et al. 1992), this theoretical background can also grasp the current political emphasis on lifelong learning. From this perspective, reforms as the introduction of qualification frameworks can be seen as instruments aimed at linking the different levels and ways of education together and at enabling continuous qualification of the citizens (see e.g. EU Commission 2005: 8). From a new institutionalist perspective, the Bologna discussion on lifelong learning should be considered as a regional enactment of world culture: The value of education over the life-span is emphasized by international bodies, taken up by national ones, and should result in a wide-spread acceptance of this value. Thus, we expect the international debate on Bologna and lifelong learning to have a positive impact on actors' discussion in different countries, which empirically would mean we would observe convergence among the countries. This should also be reflected in the individual participation in learning, which we expect to increase over time.

III. Methods and Data

In order to examine these questions, we first describe the European level of education policy making. By means of central documents in the Bologna process, we then isolate three dimensions of lifelong learning – access, flexibility and recognition – that we afterwards analyze in Germany, France, Italy and the UK. These country studies encompass the analysis of legal frameworks linked to lifelong learning, the positions of NGOs as rectors' and students' organizations, and education statistics.[2] Besides referring to legal texts, data used are publications and documents from publicly available websites of the different organizations. Such documents are e.g. background texts representing the result of specific discussions in the Bologna process, publications of national higher education actors, and conference programs. These documents are all assumed to be part of the international and national discussion of the Bologna process and to express actors' position or the information that specific actors find useful.[3]

As empirical measure of individual participation rates we focus on the age of higher education entrants and the age composition of the student population. Data source is the online 'OECD education database' that is based on the UOE (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, OECD and Eurostat) questionnaires on education statistics. This instrument provides internationally comparable statistics and indicators on key aspects of the education systems based on national administrative sources. Albeit the aim of comparability, statistical categories tend to be influenced by the national degree and qualification structures and some indicators lack data or suffer different methods of classification across countries. With a focus on the age of new entrants and the age composition of the overall student population, we have chosen those indicators that show the highest degree of comparability, and, as in the case of Italy, we also indicate constraints of comparison.

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2 The latest year of observation was 2006/2007, if not otherwise indicated.

3 Most websites were checked between March and July 2005, looking for manifest references to lifelong learning or issues linked to it. However, material found could be biased since critical background remarks or important material might not be published. Nonetheless, all organizations are members of highly developed and democratic industrial societies and, in principle, have the same chance to publish the material they intend to, so that a bias from one country to another can be excluded. Another method that would have been eligible for our purpose would have been interviews. However, due to restrictions in time and resources we excluded this method from the very beginning. By our emphasis on the effects of the Bologna process, dealing with publicly available documents as actor statements seems adequate.

IV. European Education Policy

Discussing about European activities in education policy is common today, but the development of such activities had long been constrained by the member states' perception of education as a predominantly national task. The role of the European Community was originally limited to action schemes, recognition guidelines and vocational training (Hackl 2001; Linsemann 2002). Member states did not explicitly include higher education as a European field of action in the Rome Treaty and opposed the Commission's harmonization efforts in this field (Linsemann 2002). Consequently, the Commission only set up cooperation and mobility programs – as Erasmus – and strictly respected the diversity of national higher education systems (Teichler 1998; Linsenmann 2002).

Only in 1993, in articles 126 and 127 of the 1993 Maastricht treaty, did education become a regular task of European activities, but countries explicitly excluded harmonization. In 1997, member states acknowledged the rising relevance of education for both individuals and societies with the addition of a new paragraph in the preamble of the European Community Treaty as amended in Amsterdam (Amsterdam Treaty 1997:§2). Since then, educational issues have risen on the EU agenda, prominently featured in the conclusions of the European Council in Lisbon 2000 (Linsemann 2002; Balzer and Rusconi 2007). The Council outlined that in order to 'become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' by 2010, Europe's education and training systems need to adapt to the challenges posed by the knowledge-based society (EU Council President 2000). The rising awareness of the long-term implications of education for individuals and societies was accompanied by a more prominent acknowledgment of lifelong learning issues in international agendas, which stimulated national debates (see e.g. OECD 1996; EU Commission 2000; Schuetze 2006). The 2000 Commission's 'Memorandum on Lifelong Learning' encouraged broad discussion, listing lifelong learning as a 'guiding principle' in education and emphasising the need of its implementation (EU Commission 2000: 3). Since then, lifelong learning has even become a more prominent part of European education policy (e.g. EU Commission 2001; EU Council 2002).

In the late 1990s, increased activities in higher education were initiated by national governments, too: The so-called Bologna Process was set in motion in 1998 by a meeting of the education ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the UK at the Sorbonne University. There, they agreed to introduce a university system with two cycles and the use of credits in order to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Sorbonne Declaration 1998). Most importantly, this declaration invited other European countries to join the agreement and thus led to the Bologna process. In 1999, education ministers of all EU members and 15 further European countries signed the Bologna Declaration. Countries agreed to coordinate their national policies and committed themselves to six objectives concerning the creation and – worldwide – promotion of the EHEA;

namely: readable and comparable degrees in a two-cycle structure and including a credit point system, quality assurance and mobility issues, as well as the promotion of a European dimension in higher education (Bologna Declaration 1999). Coherent with the longstanding efforts of the member countries to limit EU action, this process originated outside formal EU influence as an independent intergovernmental action, but in fact it brought together different actors and issues that had been discussed separately in earlier years (Balzer and Rusconi 2007). Although Bologna does not include formally binding obligations, it has become a permanent source for reforms in higher education over the course of the following years. In 2001, lifelong learning was added to the Bologna objectives (Prague Communiqué 2001). Moreover, since that summit, the European Commission has been admitted as an official member of the process and NGOs, such as the associations of European rectors (EUA) and students (ESIB, now: ESU) were given a consultative role.[4] In 2003, the education ministers established a stocktaking procedure to assess national progress in the implementation of intermediate priorities (Berlin Communiqué 2003). During the Bergen meeting 2005, lifelong learning was a prominent issue on the conference agenda and the ministers agreed to assess its progress in the next stocktaking report (Bergen Communiqué 2005: 5). Yet in 2007, the ministers noted that in most countries 'a more systematic development of flexible learning paths to support lifelong learning' and the recognition of prior learning needed further development (London Communiqué 2007: 3).

[4] However, whereas rectors were full members of the Bologna Follow-up Group until 2001, students became full observers only in the beginning of 2000.

V. Lifelong Learning Dimensions in the Bologna Process

Given that activities concerning lifelong learning became manifold and multiplied over the course of the last years, inquiring whether the international level had any impact needs a more precise frame of the concept. Implicitly, lifelong learning has been part of Bologna since its beginning: Already the Sorbonne Declaration (1998: 2) refers to different entrance points into academia, the introduction of credits and a two-tiered study structure. However, only the Bologna Declaration (1999: 3) explicitly mentions lifelong learning as means for acquiring credits in a non-higher education context. In preparation for the 2001 meeting, higher education was framed as an element of lifelong learning, and the Prague Communiqué (2001: 2) prominently states that 'lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life'. Even more explicit, the 2003 Berlin Communiqué asserts the need to open higher education for lifelong learning processes. The ministers acknowledged the contribution of higher education for realizing lifelong learning and emphasized the recognition of prior learning and the use of the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) – later renamed the 'European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System' (DG for Education and Culture 2004) – for enhancing learning transitions (Berlin Communiqué 2003: 6). The 2005 Bergen meeting prominently dealt with lifelong learning, emphasizing the creation of a European-wide qualification framework for higher education, which should be complementary with other, non-academic qualification frameworks (Bergen Communiqué 2005). Given the modest progress of lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning in the countries, in the London Communiqué (2007: 3) the ministers asked the Bologna Following-Up Group to increase its work on these issues.

Within a few years, lifelong learning has thus become a prominent issue on the Bologna agenda. Inductively, by analyzing the different statements, three dimensions of lifelong learning can be isolated in the European debate – access, flexibility and recognition. The Sorbonne Declaration introduces the issue of access: Entrance to higher education should be facilitated for diverse groups and at different times of their lives. Higher education institutions should thus accept individuals without formal qualifications for university enrollment. To increase participation of non-traditional students, knowledge acquired outside academic institutions should be recognized (Bologna Declaration 1999: 3). Thus, on the one hand, Bologna aims to enhance inclusion by opening universities to individuals who were formerly excluded from higher education; on the other hand it recognizes the academic value of knowledge obtained outside academic institutions. However, access and recognition are not the only problems related to increased participation, but discussing lifelong learning in a higher education context also means making higher education 'adult friendly' (OECD 2001: 25)

and increasing the flexibility of provision. This third dimension is coherent with the Sorbonne's assertion that students should enter academic institutions at any point of their life. This idea implies abandoning the view of education as 'once in a lifetime experience' with a strict division between employment and education sequences. Quite the opposite, one precondition for the 'knowledge society' is the continuous updating and upgrading of qualifications and skills. Consequently, higher education institutions ought to offer programs which can e.g. be pursued while in employment.

Focusing on access, flexibility and recognition thus delivers a framework for analyzing national lifelong learning policy attempts. The following analyses focus on Germany, France, Italy and UK, which have initiated the Bologna process by signing the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998. These four countries agreed upon the same goals and have had the same amount of time to introduce the reforms envisaged by Bologna, but they also started with very different domestic conditions in higher education.

VI. Analyzing the Bologna Initiators:

Germany

The German higher education system consists of a large sum of institutions and governance is divided between the state and the federal levels. Especially the latter makes reform procedures difficult, since decision-making often needs to be consensual. Nonetheless, Bologna has become a major issue in German higher education policy with significant impact. Several changes, however, had already been launched before: In 1998, Germany introduced BA and MA programs, without them being obligatory. Over the course of Bologna, these have now become the standard study structure.

On the governmental level, lifelong learning has become an issue only in recent years. The education ministry published a first study on lifelong learning in 1996 (Dohmen 1996), but recent major activities, as the national 'Commission for Financing Lifelong Learning', did not emphasize the role of higher education (Expertenkommission zur Finanzierung lebenslangen Lernens 2004). In contrast, German rectors already emphasized lifelong learning and continuing education in higher education in the early 1990s (e.g. HRK 1993: Preface). Differently, students have dealt with the issue only to a minor extent, probably because of the Bologna agenda (FZS 2005a).

Isolating policies and policy proposals on access, flexibility and recognition, the German situation can be summarized as follows: In general, *access* to higher education is obtained with the 'Abitur' or equivalent school certificates. Some exceptions to these rules had been established already before Bologna: Persons with professional background can be treated as equal if corresponding laws on the state level exist (HRG 1998:§27(2),2). Although not yet widely implemented, rectors proposed the integration of students with professional background but without formal higher education entrance qualification already in the early 1990s (HRK 1992). New access problems, however, might arise with the introduction of tuition fees. The Federal Constitutional Court in January 2005 allowed such fees and some states have introduced them. This might further change the German student body that already presents an under-representation of students from lower socioeconomic background (BMBF 2004).

Continuing education for graduates shows the largest *flexibility* in German higher education. Already before Bologna, the number of continuing education programs at higher education institutions had increased: from 426 in 1989 (Western Germany) to 1226 in 1996.[5] In 2000, rectors' and employers' associations made first plans for dual programs that combine apprenticeships and higher education, to be established in cooperation with employers (HRK and

[5] Own calculations on the basis of HRK (1996) and WRK (1989). 1989 data exclude teacher specialization courses (517 courses when including these).

BDA 2000). Rectors and employers regard these programs as an important element of future higher education and industry development. However, although many students work during their studies, flexible study structures or part-time studies were introduced only recently and reluctantly. German higher education institutions offer around 10 percent of continuing studies as part-time programs, but only 1.3 percent at the stage of the first cycle.[6] Rectors recommend the introduction of part-time studies, in particular at the MA level. But the engagement of opening such learning paths goes hand in hand with questions of funding, which is assumed to be secured by fees to be paid (HRK 2003).

Questions of *recognition* appeared on German agendas only after being launched by Bologna. In 2002, the state ministers decided that up to 50 percent of prior learning can count as equal to higher education, if it corresponds to the study program (KMK 2002). Although this regulation was emphasized by a joint statement of the federal state, the states and the rectors' conference in 2003 (BMBF et al. 2003), it has not yet been implemented at local level (Reichert and Tauch 2005: 23). Another means concerning recognition are credit point systems. Although these have been widely introduced, only in 2005 did the German education ministers decide to introduce a qualification framework for higher education with a perspective to recognize non-higher education, too (KMK 2005). Students remain skeptical whether such framework will enable increased recognition or access (FZS 2005b).

The reluctant national debate on lifelong learning is also reproduced in the age composition of new enrolments in tertiary education. Figure 1 shows only slight differences across the time period considered: More than 80 percent of newly enrolling students are younger than 25 years. The great majority of new pupils is aged 20 to 24 years (ca. 65 percent). Although in all four countries analyzed, the theoretical starting age, i.e. the age established by law or regulation for entry at tertiary education is 18/19 years, Germany presents a low proportion of such new students (ca. 18 percent in the years considered).

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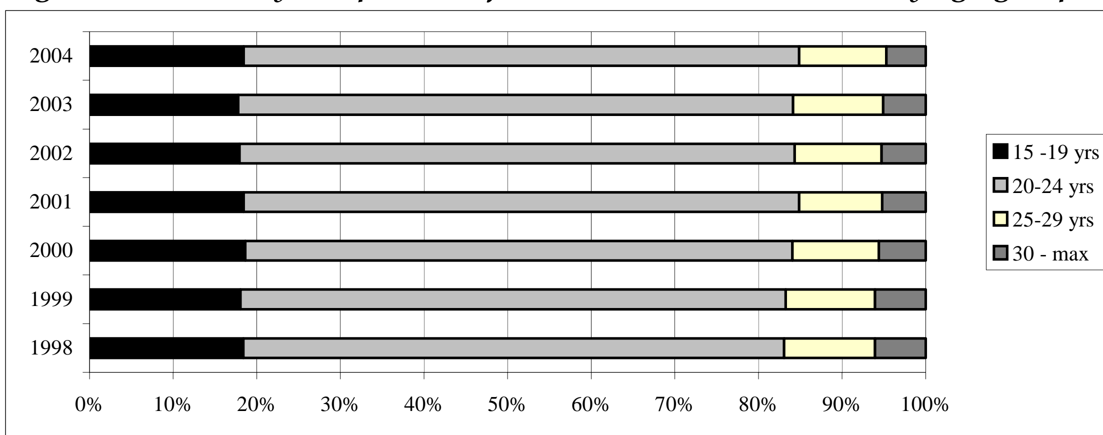
6 Date: 12 May 2005; Source: www.hochschulkompass.de; Own calculations based on a query of 'Teilzeitstudium' (part-time program) in 'grundständige Studiengänge' (first cycle, result: 125 out of 9162) and in 'weiterführende Studiengänge' (second cycle, result: 216 out of 2066). Germany provides the OECD database with no information about full vs. part-time students enrolled in tertiary-type A programs (ISCED 5A); i.e. largely theory-based programs designed to provide sufficient qualifications for entry to advanced research programs and professions with high skill requirements. (UNESCO 1997: §87). They represent the initial stage of tertiary education but usually do not lead to advanced research degrees. During the time period from 1998 and 2004 the proportion of part-time students enrolled in tertiary-type B programs (ISCED 5B) remained quite stable at ca. 16 percent (OECD Education Database, own calculations). ISCED 5B programs are typically shorter than those of tertiary-type A and focus on practical, technical or occupational skills for direct labour market entry (OECD 2004: 107).

Fig. 1: Germany: Proportion of new entrants in ISCED 5A by age-groups



Source: OECD Education Database, own calculations

This is the result of a lagged entry in tertiary education *after* having obtained qualification for it. Young people in Germany complete military and civil service before beginning their studies, and they often achieve apprenticeships before entering the university.[7] Regarding the age composition of new entrants Germany is quite homogeneous and recently introduced pathways to higher education are not yet reflected in growing numbers of older individuals entering academia.

Student population is more age-heterogeneous than new entrants, as the length of study varies among different fields of study and is also related to other life commitments of individuals. Between 1998 and 2004, however, student population in ISCED 5A education programs, i.e. the initial stage of tertiary education, became both more homogeneous and younger: the proportion of students aged 20 to 24 years increased from 38 to 47 percent, while the proportion of older students decreased.[8] Due to this trend towards a younger student population, Germany is now becoming more similar to the other three countries, in which over 60 percent of the student population are 24 years old or younger (OECD Education database, own calculations). Given that reducing the duration of studies was a common concern of many European countries and an aim of German reforms (Knudsen et al. 1999: 3), we could interpret the younger age composition of the student population as a successful achievement. Yet, since the proportion of older students did not increase by new enrollments, we can also conclude that the aim of opening higher education to non-traditional – usually older – students was not achieved. Lifelong learning is thus not yet widely established in Germany: While some debates have been started, in par-

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7 26 percent of all new higher education entrants in 2000 had already terminated an apprenticeship of usually 2-3 years (see BMBF 2002: 189-90). This is confirmed by the OECD data, according to which ca. 50 percent of new enrolments are aged 20 to 22 years old.

8 From 36 to 31 percent for the age group 25-29 and from 23 to 19 percent for students aged 30 and older (OECD Education database, own calculations).

ticular on initiative of higher education rectors, empirical findings do not illustrate changes in the age structure.

France

The French education system is centrally organized and continues to be a binary system of universities and grandes écoles (Krebs 1994: 23-4). Bologna nonetheless had a large impact and the French system is now structured along a three-cycle study structure with 'Licence', 'Maitrise' and 'Doctorat' (French Direction for Higher Education 2005: 7). This transformation, however, had been proposed and discussed before Bologna: In 1998, the Attali report recommended a three-cycles reform to reduce the disparity between lower-prestigious universities and high-prestigious grandes écoles (Attali 1998). This report further included suggestions in respect to universities as part of a continuing education structure. With regard to lifelong learning the French government explicitly mentions that Bologna and the development of lifelong learning 'are designed and made real within the same approach'. Accordingly, the three-cycle structure should enable institutions to develop 'modular learning paths' for students who re-enter higher education and allow the integration of 'attendance' and 'distant' learning (French Direction for Higher Education 2005: 7,14-5). However, the governmental approach to lifelong learning concentrates on the recognition of prior learning, but pays only little attention to access and flexibility also after Bologna picked up these issues. With regard to the actors involved, French students and rectors put a different emphasis on the Bologna Process and lifelong learning. Students, at least partly, welcome Bologna reforms, particularly the introduction of a three-cycle structure and the inclusion of lifelong learning, but insist on it as a right to learn, not as an obligation (FAGE 2003a).[9] Only recently and with explicit reference to Bologna, the French rectors' conference dedicated a session to lifelong learning, stating that it is one of the core tasks of the future university (CPU 2005: 35-7).

Focusing on policies and policy proposal on access, flexibility and recognition, the French situation can be summarized as follows: *Access* to universities is easier than to the highly selective grandes écoles. Usually, applicants hold a 'baccalauréat' or an equivalent certificate (Eurydice, 2000: 328-9). The introduction of 'licence' degrees aims at increasing access to higher education up to 50 percent of a cohort (French Direction for Higher Education 2005: 7). However, as in other countries, the two-cycle structure raises access questions to the MA level. Although access to a MA program is guaranteed to applicants with a 'li-

[9] To secure progress of Bologna reforms, the organization issued an open letter to the former education ministers, requesting public support for the new degree structure (FAGE 2003b). Students further criticize a lack of engagement of French officials in the process (UNEF 2005a).

cence' in the same field of study, there is a selection mechanism for students after the first year (Reichert and Tauch 2005: 17).

Continuing education as a means for *flexibility* of educational careers has been an issue for the French universities before Bologna, too: The higher education sector offers different forms of continuing education (see FCU 2006). Although the idea of a young full-time student is predominant, it is not universal: Rectors see both the integration of mature students and the recognition of prior vocational learning as a future need (CPU 1999: 8). However, also after Bologna part-time studies remain only of minor concern: During a meeting of the rectors´ conference, the minister of higher education mentioned this issue – explicitly as a means for ensuring lifelong learning (CPU 2001: 8) – but it was not further followed by the rectors. In 2002, rectors discussed the changing role of the universities due to lifelong learning activities (CPU 2002: 66-7), but did not mention specific measures for groups concerned, as part-time and mature students.[10]

In contrast, the *recognition* of prior learning had been implemented well before Bologna: Since 1985, applicants can enter universities without formal qualification, if they acquired an adequate qualification in professional life. Within the course of the Bologna Process these measures received a new impetus, and during the last few years the French government has introduced new mechanisms for recognition. Since 2001, the academic title of an engineer can be awarded to persons who did not formally study engineering, but worked a minimum of five years as an engineer in public or state enterprises. Since 2002, candidates with professional experience of at least three years can reduce their study load for a corresponding degree – or they are awarded the degree without formal studies, depending on their prior qualification (Qualification Framework Working Group 2005: 138-39; French Direction for Higher Education 2007: 11).[11]

Again, the national discussions are mirrored in the age composition of new enrolments. According to figure 2, the age composition of new enrollments has become more heterogeneous: although over 90 percent are students younger than 25 years, this proportion decreased from 98 to 92 percent. Moreover, between 2002 and 2003 the proportion of 15 to 19-year-old pupils declined by ca. 13 percent and that of 20 to 24-years old increased around 8 percent. Although declining, France still shows a high congruency between the legally foreseen age and the actual starting age at tertiary education: the proportion of 18-19 years old decreased from 73 percent in 1998 to 60 percent in 2003.

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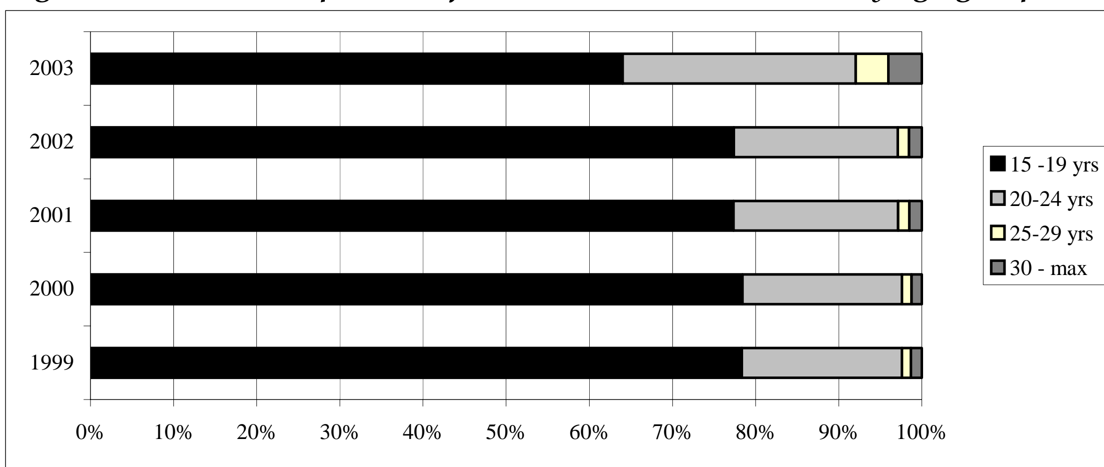
10 France does not provide the OECD education database with any information on part-time students enrolled in tertiary education, neither for ISCED 5A nor 5B programs. Although this does not signify that students do not pursue their studies part-time, but only that French administrative sources do not differentiate among students, it is nonetheless an indicator of the prevalent full-time conception of the tertiary education system.

11 Differently, for the student organization, recognition mostly seems to be an issue of mobility, less of the inclusion of other learning experiences. UNEF (2005b: 10) shortly mentions the fact that other learning forms are discussed to be recognized in higher education.

Fig. 2: France: Proportion of new entrants in ISCED 5A by age-groups



Source: OECD Education Database, own calculations

The most recent opening of higher education to non-traditional students, particularly the recognition of prior learning via professional experience, appears to be reflected in 2003 by an increase of older individuals entering academia.

Like the other countries, the general student population is more age-heterogeneous than new entrants. Between 1998 and 2004, its age composition does not show any substantial changes: the largest group consists of students aged 20 to 24 years, followed by the 15-19 age group.[12] With regard to lifelong learning goals in Bologna, it can thus be said that France set up supporting regulations, in particular related to recognition, and that a slight increase of lifelong learners can be observed.

Italy

For the longest time Italian higher education was a highly centralized and rigid system, ruled by the Ministry of Education with detailed regulations (Buonaura and Di Nauta 2003: 2). Since the late 1980s a progressive decentralization has taken place: In 1989, the government strengthened the organizational, didactic and financial autonomy of universities (Eurydice 2006b: 115). The most significant reform was the 1999 ministerial decree on university autonomy, which gave higher education institutions the responsibility for the content and flexibility of courses within a national framework (Eurydice 2006b: 119). This reform introduced a university credit system and a new university structure, which is organized in three cycles and is an integral part of Bologna (MURST 2005: 17).

Until now, almost no lifelong learning measure in higher education has been implemented in Italy. Bologna has only raised awareness for this topic in

[12] In 1998 57 percent of the students enrolled in ISCED 5A programs were aged 20 to 24 years (in 2004: 56 percent), and 24 percent were aged 15 to 19 years (in 2004: 23 percent); (OECD Education database, own calculations).

public debates – e.g. Italian rectors criticize the brevity with which lifelong learning is dealt in the Bologna Process and asks for concrete European references concerning such aspects as continuous education, part-time students or distance education (CRUI 2003: 3). The organization believes that a European dimension would help overcoming national and institutional difficulties.[13] Differently, Italian students see the implementation of Bologna skeptical. According to them, the new degrees are neither able to combine the necessary high cultural education with professional skills, nor to reduce the actual length of study (UDU 2001: 1).[14] They warn that highly specialized BA courses constrain the possibility of continuous education and the flexibility between different fields of studies (UDU 2001: 2003a).

With regard to access, flexibility and recognition, the Italian situation can be summarized as follows: *Access* to higher education is granted to all holders of an upper secondary school leaving certificate and procedures for students without this qualification do not exist.[15] Furthermore, depending on the household income, there are tuition fees that vary between universities and courses of study. The two-cycle structure raises access problems in particular to the second level where access restrictions and higher fees are introduced.

Italian rectors highlight the positive effect of university autonomy and the two-cycle structure, in particular with regard to *flexibility* (CRUI 1999). Rectors interpret increasing matriculations as a result of universities' capacity to respond both to diversified educational demands of high school graduates and of employed persons who yearn for more education or lifelong learning (CRUI 1999: 1; CRUI 2001b). With a resolution on lifelong learning in 2001, rectors encourage universities to develop competences in the field of adult and continuous education: Higher education institutions should offer courses specifically aimed at updating skills of professionals, teachers, and technicians (CRUI 2001a). Although a large number of Italian students have to work in order to finance their studies (UDU 2003b), part-time study courses are not widely implemented. The 1999 reform conceived parallel part-time educational paths, yet many universities ignored this issue. Rectors, for example, mention part-time students only shortly and without great emphasis (CRUI 1999). As a consequence, students often can choose neither between part- and full-time nor between alternative paths. Thus students criticize that permanent education – one

13 CRUI appeals for and welcomes a strong European dimension in higher education: In 2001, the organization even appealed for including higher education in the EU treaty and the future EU Constitution (CRUI 2001b).

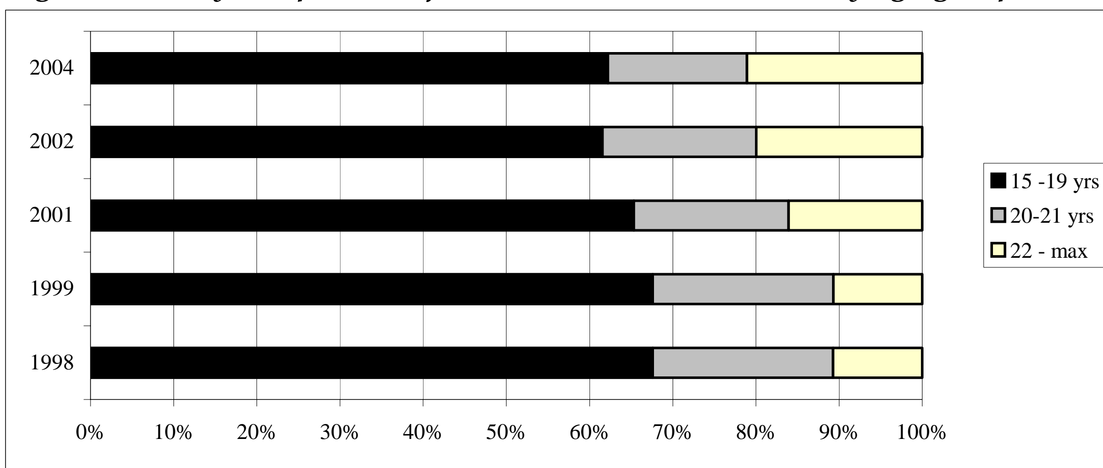
14 The Italian National Student Union is a minor actor in the national reform process (UDU 2002). The organization does not focus on lifelong learning issues.

15 Additionally, a 2004 ministerial decree established entrance tests at the university level (Eurydice 2006: 126). Failure does not preclude enrolment, but results in additional training within the first year of study.

of the explicit objectives of the 1999 reform – has not been realized (UDU 2003b).[16]

Italian policies and discussions on recognition are not concerned with non-university learning. Reference to *recognition* is made almost exclusively with regard to foreign degrees and mobility issues. Only since 2004, have individual universities been allowed to regulate the accreditation of competences acquired through professional experience (Italian Ministry for Education 2005).

Fig. 3: Italy: Proportion of new entrants in ISCED 5A by age-groups



Source: OECD Education Database, own calculations

Regrettably, information on the age of new entrants in Italian tertiary education is less comprehensive than in other countries: since 2001, all new entrants older than 21 years fall under one category. Consequently, it is not possible to elaborate on that group. Nonetheless, national discussions in higher education and individual learning activities are also reproduced in the age composition of new enrolments. Figure 3 shows that age composition is becoming slightly more heterogeneous: Although the great majority of new enrolments are individuals younger than 22 years old, this proportion decreased from 89 to 78 percent. Nonetheless, the largest group of new pupils is 18 and 19 years old, which is the legal entry age.[17]

As in the other countries, student population in Italy is more age-heterogeneous than new entrants. The proportion of students aged 20 to 24 years enrolled in ISCED 5A programs declined from 55 to 49 percent between 1998 and 2004, while the proportion of students 30 years and older increased from 9 to 13 percent.[18] However, because of missing information on the age of new enrollments, it is impossible to determine whether this increase of older

[16] Italy does not submit any information on part-time students enrolled in tertiary education to the OECD database, neither for ISCED 5A nor 5B programs.

[17] The proportion of 18-19 years old decreased from 68 to 62 percent between 1998 and 2004.

[18] Students aged 25-29 remained stable at ca. 20 percent (OECD Education database, own calculations).

students reflects rising difficulties in completing the courses of study in time or a growing participation of older individuals. Thus far, lifelong learning in Italian higher education is not widely spread, although some legislative measures were intended to support that aim.

United Kingdom

The UK education system consists of the systems in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland and their differences are most visible in the school system, but less so in higher education (UNESCO 2003: UK). The study programs are traditionally structured along BA, MA and PhD. For a long time Bologna reforms were only of minor importance for the higher education sector (Reichert and Tauch 2005: 40), and interest in the Bologna process has increased only since the 2003 Berlin Conference (Universities UK Europe Unit 2005b: 1). British higher education institutions partly criticize a lack of ministerial interest (Reichert and Tauch 2005: 43-4) and the representation body of the higher education institutions encourages its members to participate in the process. Universities generally see the Bologna action lines positively, and the inclusion of lifelong learning is particularly appreciated (Universities UK Europe Unit 2005a: 2, 30).[19]

In general, education is of major importance in political discussions and lifelong learning has been a central concept before Bologna (see e.g. Taylor 2005; Watson and Taylor 1998). Higher education was, however, not fully integrated, but different forms of study are traditionally common in the UK. The diversity of the student body and the significance of lifelong learning are included in policy analyses of the rectors (Universities UK 2004: 14). The organization even sponsors 'Adult Learner Awards' (Universities UK 2006). Student policy proposals include part-time and mature students, too, while not particularly focusing on lifelong learning (NUS UK 2005: 5-6, 10).[20]

Isolating policies and policy proposals on access, flexibility and recognition, the situation in the UK can be summarized as follows: Generally, *access* to higher education is possible without formal qualification, since applications from mature candidates with appropriate experience are welcomed by most institutions, which principally decide autonomously on admission (Eurydice 2006a: 7/13, 5/11). It is prominent government policy to widen access to higher education and to enable participation of 50 percent of the 18-30 years age cohort by 2010.[21] In 2001, the government created 'Foundation Degrees' to facilitate

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[19] The universities link 'Bologna' to employability of UK citizens, international competitiveness and an international marketplace of higher education (Universities UK 2004: 7; Universities UK 2005: 11).

[20] Bologna is not prominently featured by the national student union.

[21] However, the governmental focus on this group is explicitly criticized by rectors because it ignores the potential of older students (Universities UK 2003: 32). Increased access for ma-

access to higher education via a vocational path, intending to make them the standard two-year higher education qualification (DfES 2003: 57-63). However, since 2006 British universities are allowed to set up tuition fees without any ceiling, which can lead to major access problems.[22]

Flexibility of study patterns was widely established due to the traditional three-cycle structure. Already before Bologna, part-time programs were available and, additionally, degree programs became modularized, allowing students to combine courses either at different institutions, at different times of their educational career or part-time (Eurydice 2000: 498-505).[23] The large amount of mature and part-time students is reflected in the current positions of the stakeholder associations: Increased opportunities for part-time and mature students are an integral part of students' policy proposals (NUS UK 2005: 5-6, 10). Rectors see the need for further financial support of part-time studies, too. Moreover, they propose different measures for increasing the flexibility of learning opportunities, as foundation degrees that continue up to an 'Honours degree', the possibility to switch attendance modes or the introduction of flexible starting points (Universities UK 2003: 11,35; Universities UK 2005: 7).[24]

To facilitate *recognition* between different institutions and learning paths, credit point systems have been established in most institutions (DfES 2005: 6), a development that started before Bologna. However, the system of recognition has recently been enlarged: In England, Scotland and Wales such systems partly include all qualifications, obtained either within or outside higher education and are linked to general qualification frameworks (Universities UK Europe Unit 2005b: 5). The recently established 'Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework' encompasses both academic and vocational qualifications, either gained in school, in higher education or at the workplace. It is planned to extend this framework to other learning procedures, such as qualifications of professional bodies or learning in the voluntary sector (Eurydice 2006a: 10/11). British universities emphasize the importance of cohesion between a higher education area and a general qualification framework that includes non-higher education (Universities UK Europe Unit 2005b: 4-5).

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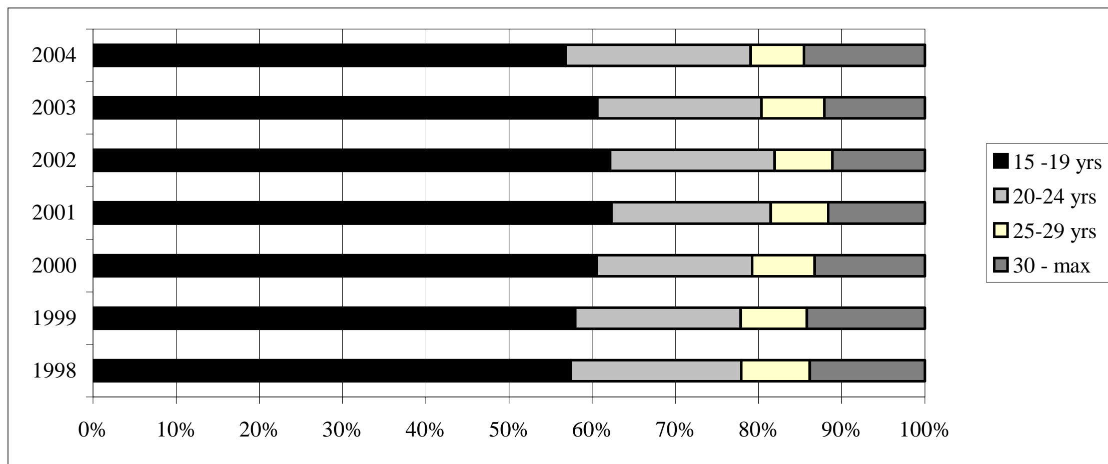
ture students is one of the main fields in Scottish higher education policy (Eurydice 2000: 517).

22 The rise of fees is accompanied by a plan of how to increase access of these groups who are still underrepresented in British universities (see www.offa.org.uk). Such regulations, however, focus on full-time students. Scotland has different conditions: Tuition fees have been abolished for Scottish domiciled students and other groups can profit from this regulation, too (Eurydice 2006a: 5/11).

23 The UK submits detailed information to the OECD database about full vs. part-time students enrolled in both ISCED 5A and ISCED B education programs. From 1998 to 2004, the proportion of part-time students enrolled in ISCED 5A increased from 20 to 28 percent; for ISCED 5B the proportion increased from 70 to 75 percent.

24 The Government's 2003 White Paper took up some of these ideas and included possibilities as credit accumulation, e-learning, part-time studies, and additional studies after a foundation degree (DfES 2003: 63-5).

Fig. 4: UK: Proportion of new entrants in ISCED 5A by age-groups



Source: OECD Education Database, own calculations

National discussions in higher education and individual learning activities are also reproduced in the age composition of new students. Figure 4 shows only slight differences across the time period considered: ca. 80 percent of newly enrolled students are younger than 25 years. Like in France and Italy, also in the UK the majority of new pupils is aged 15 to 19 years old, and mostly 18/19 years, the legal starting age for tertiary education.[25] Nonetheless, in comparison to the other three countries, the UK presents the highest age heterogeneity of new enrolments. In particular, the proportion of new students aged 30 years and older is considerably higher in the UK. This clearly reflects the greater opportunities offered to non-traditional students.

Like in the other countries, student population is more age-heterogeneous than new entrants. Moreover, between 1998 and 2004 student population in ISCED 5A became slightly older: The proportion of students aged 30 years and older increased from 22 to 25 percent, while the proportion of younger students decreased a bit.[26] Given that the proportion of new enrolments by older individuals increased too, we can conclude that the UK not only discusses creating opportunities for lifelong learning, but also has realized it to a certain extent – rather independently from Bologna. Such broader opportunities available to mature students are reflected in a greater proportion of older individuals enrolled in higher education. Moreover, this country also presents a high proportion of part-time students.

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25 Whereas from 1998 to 2002 the proportion of 18 and 19 years old increased from 54 to 59 percent, in the following years their proportion declined back to 54 percent in 2004. No other age group shows a comparable variation. Most recently, the proportion of 20 to 24 years old and that of 30 years and older increased of respectively ca. 2 percent.

26 The proportion of the age group 15-19 decreased from 27 to 24 percent between 1998 and 2004 (OECD Education database, own calculations).

VII. Conclusions

Albeit a commonly agreed statement on the importance of lifelong learning, our paper shows that countries realize lifelong learning in higher education quite differently and that this situation partially reflects previous – 'ante-Bologna' – national premises: In Germany, recognition became an issue *after* Bologna put it on the agenda, while access and flexibility were discussed *before*. In France access and flexibility issues do not seem to be widely affected by Bologna, and recognition of former learning was established *before*. However, extended guidelines were introduced afterwards. In Italy, Bologna discussions were taken up, and continuous education is seen as one aim, but major changes have not occurred so far. In the UK, the wide-ranging support of lifelong learning was established well *before* Bologna took up this issue. The UK not only discusses creating lifelong learning opportunities, but people have already realized them to a certain extent. As was shown, national variations are also reflected in the age composition of new enrollments and the student population. Although the aggregate data is only a rough indicator, it nonetheless points out that national differences in the political discussion are reproduced in different lifelong learning opportunities.

However, across the four countries, a constant pattern can be seen: The major obstacle for lifelong learning is the predominant emphasis on the young, standard full-time student. This is also reflected in most national administrative statistics that do not include part-time students. Although this does not signify that students do not pursue their studies part-time, it is nonetheless an indicator of the prevalent full-time conception of the tertiary education system. The impact of Bologna on countries' lifelong learning opportunities has so far been low. Either lifelong learning is inspired by a national emphasis on specific lifelong learning dimensions that preceded Bologna (as the UK or France) or countries have just taken up some issues, as recognition of former learning (Germany).

Also actors differ: As part of defining the future role of their institutions, some national rectors' organizations have dealt with ideas on lifelong learning, as the UK rectors and their proposals on flexible study courses or the German rectors' ideas on continuing education. In sharp contrast, students hardly deal with this issue prominently. This could either denote that both associations are in fact differently embedded in international and national discussions – which is formally not visible, but is less surprising given the groups' very different resources. Or that students' organizations could at least implicitly define their mandate as representing the standard (young, fulltime) student. Thus, besides other difficulties, lifelong learners in higher education might also face problems of representation.

Against the background of new institutionalism, we can conclude that Bologna delivers some policy ideas for national policy development, but countries

do not discontinue institutional settings and political discussions that stem from pre-Bologna times. Our expectation of convergence has thus only partially been confirmed: Visibly, countries are part of an international debate and link specific policy proposals to the Europe-wide process. The international level thus indeed delivers frames of reference and stimulates a debate on education policies; however, the specific implementation is heavily influenced by nationally predominant ideas. The result is a mix between international convergence – of the aim to enable lifelong learning – and national premises. Compared to other Bologna goals, such as the introduction of a three-cycle structure, lifelong learning is thus very much an issue where countries follow established paths.

Our findings also outline some further research areas: This paper emphasized the international level and assessed that national paths shape how international discussions are taken up. It would be worth inquiring into the specific national constellations in the process, actors' interests and historical developments more closely. Additionally, we examined the 'big four' EU countries as initiators of the process; but do smaller or more peripheral countries react in similar ways? It could be that these are more open or feel more obliged to follow the international route. Moreover, it could be inquired whether earlier discussions on lifelong learning, as have taken place in the OECD context, have been more influential in shaping national lifelong learning debates than the Bologna process currently is.

Finally, Bologna is yet some kind of 'real-time experiment' and a new assessment could be made again in a few years: The process is not yet long established and the major goals of introducing a two-cycle structure as well as credits have already been a major change for most national systems. It might be that once the countries accommodated to this transformation, more attention will be given to lifelong learning. In this light, the plea to increase activities on these issues, as requested by the London Communiqué, is an important step. Moreover, the introduction of an overarching qualification framework – as discussed in Bologna and beyond – will both deliver a common idea of institutionally realized lifelong learning in Europe, and it will support the unification of the different educational settings within each country.

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