

# BOLOGNA: SOME THOUGHTS ON ITS EFFECT ON THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

THE BOLOGNA Process is perhaps the most important factor that will shape the higher education landscape in Europe over the coming decades. This article attempts to demonstrate how the process is going to affect the strategic environment in which European universities in general, and British universities in particular, are going to have to operate. It looks first at the relationship between the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Agenda. A number of mechanisms are identified on how higher education can contribute to improved economic performance within Europe. Two factors in particular—increasing university quality and the contribution to labour mobility—are identified as having important strategic implications. The article then analyses these two factors from the point of view of British universities, and concludes that there are real threats being posed to the position of British universities as a result of the Bologna Process, due to differing perceptions of quality. Finally an analysis is made of the way in which strategic networks are being developed as a result of Bologna. The conclusion is reached that successful relationships must be built around ‘clusters of trust’ formed by universities of the same ‘pedigree’.

**Key words:** Bologna, clusters, collaboration, ECTS, European Higher Education Area, Lisbon Agenda

## Introduction

**THE SINGLE** European Act of 1986 laid the foundation for a Europe without frontiers in which the free circulation of goods, services, persons and capital is ensured. This reached fruition in the 1992 process and the creation of the Single European Market. Both the language and the nomenclature of the Act, as well as its content, gave the impression that the primary objectives of the Single Market process were (and are) economic. This was reinforced by much of the contemporary comment, both academic and non-academic. The 1992 process was seen as being a course of treatment for Europe’s economic weakness, an inability by much of European industry to compete on the world stage due to its still fragmented markets, as member states continued to protect domestic business with ‘behind the border barriers’.

There is however an important element missing from this interpretation. Significantly, the preamble to the Act appears

to commit participants to the creation of a ‘European Union’. Much debate has taken place about the nature of this statement, with the UK usually taking the position that this was no firm commitment, but rather a form of pious hope, which might possibly be achieved at some distant point in the future. However, the fact that the Single European Act provided for qualified majority voting on EC Regulations and Directives, deemed essential for completing the internal market, represented a fundamental change in the political dimension of the European project. The possibility now existed that the EC could introduce measures which might in fact damage some member states’ interests (Holmes, 1992).

It seems then that there was an element of denial in the public statements made by the creators of this new Europe. States were committing themselves implicitly to a good deal more than they were committing themselves explicitly. A

deliberate 'veil of ignorance' appears to have been draped over the political implications of the new economic decision-making procedure.

Much the same appears to be taking place with Bologna—an initiative to create a 'European Higher Education Area' by 2010—with the real motives being obscured. In a rather curious way, there is a strange juxtaposition and relationship between the two processes. The 'single market' process, whilst appearing on the surface as an economic initiative, was as much political as economic. Bologna, on the other hand, whilst appearing to focus on education as a social issue, can also be interpreted to be as much about economic as social and educational objectives, with the so-called Lisbon Agenda playing a crucial part in its development.

The rest of the article can generally be divided into two sections. Firstly, we briefly discuss the relevance of the Bologna Process to the delivery of the Lisbon Agenda. Secondly, the major part of the work looks at how Bologna is changing the strategic environment within which universities now operate. In particular our thesis is that if universities are to thrive, and even survive, in the new environment, then they need to build up and participate in 'clusters of trust'.

## Bologna and Lisbon

**ALTHOUGH** the purpose of this article is not to investigate the economics of Bologna in any great depth, it is worth considering the mechanisms by which the European Higher Education sector can contribute to the Lisbon Agenda. This is Europe's overarching strategy and it must inform all EU policy initiatives.

Proclaimed in Lisbon in March 2000, the Council of Ministers set a target for the EU to become the most dynamic, competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs, greater social cohesion and respect for the environment. Universities can contribute to achieving these objectives in a number of ways, such as through research and development, technology transfer etc. The most important, however, is the traditional primary role they play in the education and training systems within the Union.

This can be summarised as an underlying philosophy:

*Modern economies require an ever changing blend of new knowledge and educated manpower if they are to function effectively and no state can leave its higher education system to its own devices. Such action would amount to abdication*

*of responsibility which no present day government or bureaucracy could tolerate.*

Lomas (1997)

So how exactly can Bologna help to deliver Lisbon? The Bologna Process itself formally started in 1999 with the signing of the Bologna declaration. This called for:

*...the establishment by 2010 of a coherent, compatible and competitive European Higher Education Area (EHEA), attractive for European students and for students and scholars from other continents.*

Bologna Declaration, 1999

This had followed on from the Sorbonne Declaration, signed in May 1998 by the UK, France, Germany and Italy, which called for the removal of barriers within the sector, and the development of common frameworks for teaching and learning.

The mechanisms for achieving this were set out initially in a six-point plan of action:

1. The adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees.
2. The creation of a system based on two cycles roughly translating into Bachelors and Masters (later increased to three cycles).
3. The establishment of a system of credits.
4. The encouragement of student and staff mobility.
5. The development of European cooperation in quality assurance.
6. The introduction of the European dimension in higher education.

These were later supplemented by four others:

7. An emphasis on lifelong learning.
8. Promoting the attractiveness of the EHEA.
9. Emphasis on institutions and students as equal partners.
10. An EHEA and European Research Area—two pillars of the knowledge-based society.

We need to look behind this 10-point plan to understand how the Bologna European Single Education Area will help

deliver greater economic efficiency. Its contribution will lie in four areas.

## 1. Increasing university quality

This is essentially a competition effect. One of the central pillars of the Bologna Process is to standardise the structure of the university sector amongst the participants, and thus allow much greater scope for student mobility. This, it is claimed, is likely to stimulate competition between universities in attracting the best students. Because university education is supplied essentially as a heavily subsidised 'merit good', the major dimension in which competition takes place will be quality. Hence the theory is that higher mobility increases university quality, and that this raises the productivity of graduates even further. However, the case for this actually happening is not that clear cut, with Mechtenburg and Strausz (2006) for example, raising important questions as to the efficacy of this competition effect. Their findings tend to suggest that the competition effect is unlikely to occur; it happens only if the externality generated by foreign students is high enough:

*In order for the competition effect to raise quality, it must overcome the free-rider effect, that countries prefer their students to obtain their costly education abroad. Only if students are relatively unlikely to return from a foreign education and only if a country is able to appropriate a large share of a foreigner's productivity, does the positive competition effect occur. Yet, for more reasonable values of the students' return probabilities and appropriation of their productivity, the free riding effect outweighs the competition effect. Hence, with respect to the Bologna Process it seems more reasonable to expect that increased student mobility lowers university quality.*

Mechtenburg and Strausz (2006)

Quality of course can also be improved by cooperation, not only competition. Thus the strengthening under the Bologna Process of European networks of higher education and the exchange of staff and students that it has encouraged is likely to spread best practice in the European Higher Education Area.

## 2. Labour market flexibility

With the single market programme it appeared that the European Union had finally adopted a comprehensive plan to establish a true common market. The initiative involved the removal of behind the border barriers to the free move-

ment of goods, services, capital and labour; the 'Four Freedoms'. Bologna, of course, is fundamental to the latter.

Labour market flexibility is essential to the efficient operation of a market economy. It can smooth painful adjustments to changes in demand and technology, and it allows for macro-economic adjustment, especially where exchange rate, monetary and fiscal policies cannot be used, as in the Euro zone. Flexibility takes many forms; wages, working patterns, numerical and functionality. However, one of the most important elements, that of geographical mobility, is perhaps the most obvious means of adjustment between different regions and countries.

There are many constraints on geographical mobility. From the point of view of the Bologna Process's contribution to labour mobility across Europe, two are particularly important:

- language/cultural barriers—these are likely to be particularly acute for skilled or middle management; and
- mutual recognition of qualifications and training.

An essential part of the economic rationale underpinning Bologna is therefore mobility and transparency. Transparency and recognition of qualifications are central pillars of the Bologna Process and to encourage this there has been an emphasis on developing the European Qualification Network. This would create a simplified structure allowing informed international comparisons between national qualification frameworks. The aim is to have this in place by 2010. This initiative complements the Copenhagen Process, which targets transparency and recognition in the field of vocational education and training.

## 3. Cultural fluency

Mobility exposes students directly to different national cultures, giving them valuable, tacit knowledge and experience, which are essential in the globalised international business milieu.

## 4. Research & Development

At the Berlin Summit 2003 it was agreed to secure closer links between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area by including the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. Research and development, however, goes beyond the process of supervising doctoral students. Collaboration between universities and industry, from the neo-Schumpeterian perspective, is an important strategy for competing in the global marketplace.

## The strategic implications of Bologna

**THE MAIN** focus here is to investigate how the fundamental building blocks of Bologna are shaping the strategic challenges to British universities in two interrelated areas:

### 1. Mobility

We argue that one of the key components and objectives of Bologna, devising a system of allowing easy mobility of students by virtual automatic transfer between institutions, is unlikely to be realised. For this to occur, degree programmes must be easily readable and comparable. Therein lays the difficulty; Bologna, it seems to us (and we will demonstrate in more detail below), will only be effective in encouraging mobility in the context of negotiated bilateral and multilateral agreements between institutions with similar cultures and missions (Bekhradnia, 2004). Only under these circumstances will institutions be able to articulate their courses in sufficient depth to each other so that they will be confident in the learning experiences of their students.

In the increasingly competitive world of higher education, about to be made even more so by the completion of the European Higher Education Area in 2010, these alliances need to be made by institutions with more or less the same 'pedigree'. Universities attempting to encourage mobility of both students and staff between universities that have very different missions and traditions, following different teach-

ing/learning approaches and with differing research trajectories, are unlikely to succeed in their goal and are more likely to emerge from the process with tarnished reputations and dissatisfied students.

This is not, however, to argue for the harmonisation and prescription of degree programmes within such European pedigree clusters, in terms of either teaching approaches or curricula. Any attempt to restrict the independence of academic and subject specialists would inevitably damage local and national academic authority and would be bound to fail.

### 2. Quality perception and recruitment

When Bologna first emerged on the educational agenda it was seen as posing few problems for British universities. The three-cycle approach of Bachelor, Master and Doctoral studies was seen as conforming more or less to the traditional British model. The one obvious discrepancy, the one-year Masters programme common in the UK as compared with the general two-year programmes found elsewhere, was not originally perceived as a problem by British institutions, due to their perceptions of the quality of British Masters programmes. From the very beginning however, questions were being asked by other Bologna signatories on the 'lightweight' nature of the one-year Masters (UK Europe HE Unit, 2004). This scepticism has not abated in the interim, with even the British undergraduate degree being subject to criticism. There are two basic reasons for this: teaching intensity and length of study.

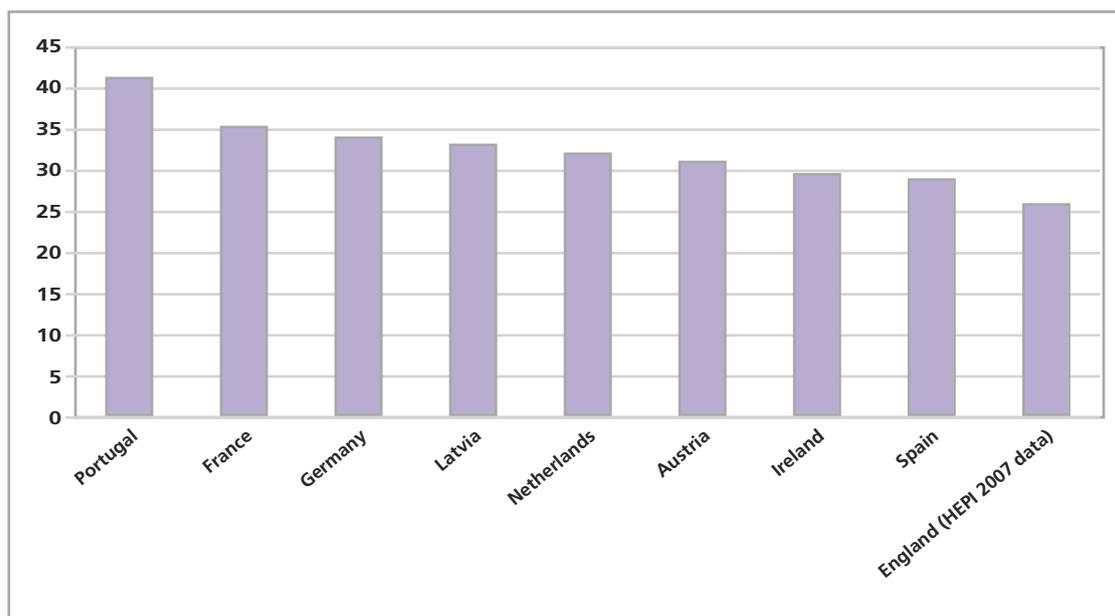


Figure 1: Weekly time budget for students studying in selected EU countries (Source: Eurostudent report in Sastry & Bekhradnia, 2007)

## Teaching intensity

Evidence suggests that in Britain the intensity of study on a weekly basis tends to be lower than that generally found in Europe. There are, of course, issues of measurement in terms of what and what not to include. The most obvious measure is class contact hours, plus the time needed to understand and assimilate course material and complete assignments. Formal class contact is easily measured, but the latter variables are more difficult. Besides taking into account individual differences in student ability, the level of intensity will also depend upon the pace of delivery, size of syllabus, class sizes and level of difficulty.

Sastry and Bekhradnia (2007), using data from the Eurostudy report combined with their own figures for English universities, found clear evidence to suggest that English (British) students put in fewer hours per week studying than their European counterparts (Figure 1). Thus a pure, weekly workload, time-based model approach to quality puts British universities in a poor comparative position. The suggestion is that on average students in Britain put in 15% less time per week than their European counterparts (Allen *et al* 2007).

## Length of study

At one level Bologna seems to be bringing the European standard towards the British position. At the undergraduate level, the Bergen Conference of European Higher Education Ministers in 2005 reaffirmed an undergraduate cycle of between 180-240 credits under the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS). Many countries have adopted the ECTS 180-credit model over three years, with others retaining the option of 240 ECTS credits over four years. At the same time, the second cycle (Masters) was confirmed as being between 90-120 ECTS credits. Basically this boils down to a difference between a calendar year (typically the British model), and a two-year Masters (typical in continental universities).

Taking these points together:

*...there is real reason to doubt whether English (British) degrees will be perceived as being of equivalent value to degrees from countries where the requirements on students are more onerous. It will be particularly difficult to maintain our argument that our relatively short degrees are comparable to those of other European countries, which is what we have argued in the context of the Bologna Process. Moreover, the availability of data on the intensity of study is improving year by year which is likely to make these comparisons an increasingly pressing issue for those charged with marketing English (British) HE overseas. It will be*

*hard to counter the likely response of a student or his or her advisers...that English universities require less of their students than universities elsewhere in Europe.*

Sastry and Bekhradnia, 2007

This threat was also recognised by the evidence presented by University College London to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee's report on the Bologna Process:

*...international students can now find very high quality programmes, taught in English at excellent universities, for little or no fee...If we want to maintain our position in the global market, a much higher level of scholarship provision has to be found.*

Essentially the educational market, of course, will determine which model will ultimately prevail. The Bologna Process certainly is not prescriptive on the length of the second cycle. British universities have argued strongly that the quality of outcomes of the British one-year Masters match the continental two-year model (Fearn, 2008). This is an argument that must be won otherwise the British position in international markets could be severely damaged.

One potentially interesting effect of the Bologna cycles starting to emerge is that institutions used to longer study programmes may not offer a three-/two-year Bologna cycle split. The example illustrated in Figure 2 is from the Normandy School which offers only a five-year programme. This model predicts students being recruited from a number of different sources, but all ultimately converging onto a five-year Masters level programme. One entry route comes directly after the Baccalaureate: these students also obtain the Bachelor during their Masters studies. Another route is through "class preparatoire", where obtaining the Bachelor is not an option. Finally there is the parallel admission, where students come in with 180 ECTS credits and enter directly onto the last two years of the Masters level courses. As can be seen, achieving a Bachelor degree is possible, but not compulsory, and can be obtained both by remaining in the institution or by studying at a partner university.

## Bureaucratic state responses v institutional clustering

**WHAT WE** can see under Bologna in terms of its effects on the strategic environment is therefore a dichotomy. On the one hand we see general, bureaucratic sector-wide European mechanisms being sought by the authorities to make Bologna operational, whilst on the other hand like-

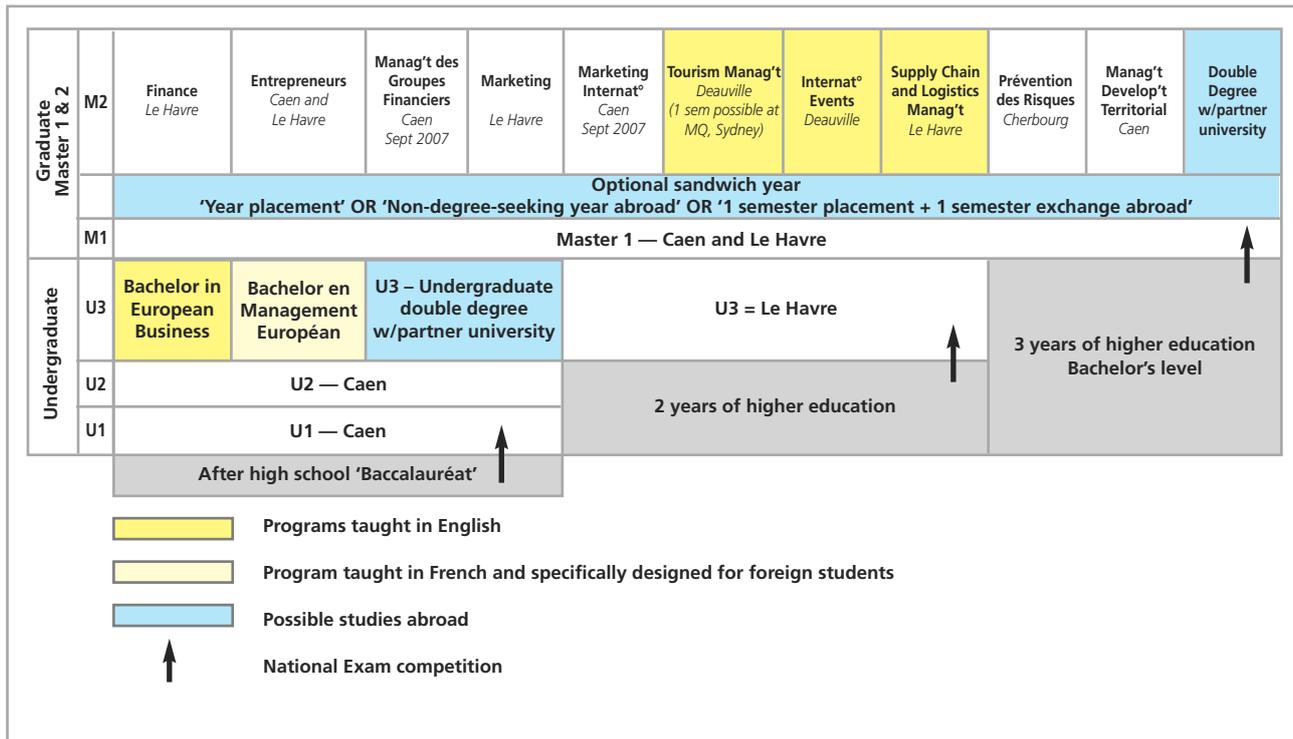


Figure 2: Normandy Business School Five-year Bologna Programme

minded institutions are constructing their own clusters to articulate their courses and student learning experiences to each other.

As far as the bureaucratic approach is concerned it was recognised from the start that ECTS was essentially a measure of input and volume, and really was no guide to either content or standards for institutions judging relevance, or standards for students seeking transfer mobility and advanced standing, or to potential students attempting to judge quality of provision. Thus on the simple volume issue British institutions were, from the start, at something of a disadvantage.

The argument, however, was/is about more than volume, though as suggested above there is some doubt as to how long this issue can be ignored. The British position was/is to argue that what really matters are outcomes. Thus there have been some efforts to define commonly acceptable outcomes.

For example, there are the so-called 'Dublin Descriptors' (Joint Quality Initiative, 2004) that set out in very general terms the level of credits that would have been achieved in the Bologna cycles one and two. This was complemented in 2000 with the setting up of a pilot project by several European universities, supported by the European Commission, called the 'Tuning Project' with the objective of "Tuning educational structures in Europe". This was much more discipline specific. Four lines of approach were taken:

1. Generic competences.
2. Subject-specific competences.
3. The role of ECTS as an accumulation system.
4. The role of learning, teaching, assessment and performance in relation to quality assurance and evaluation.

Secondly, we have seen increasing use of 'learning outcomes' within module descriptors in curriculum design and development. There is a whole debate on the efficacy of using learning outcomes within higher education, well summed up by Adam (2002). Some argue that they constrict the learning process and lead to a target-led structure, that they are not consistent with liberal 'Humboldt' conception of the university and that they are resented by academics. Others however argue that they ensure consistent delivery, stop overlap in course design and inform student choice. As far as Bologna is concerned however, they are part of the necessary bureaucracy as they can be related to external reference points such as the level descriptors referred to earlier, and can help in course articulation as networks of universities develop.

Thirdly, there has been an emphasis on trusted and comparable quality assurance systems, so that universities within the Bologna area can have confidence that credits accumulated in one country are consistent in terms of quality and standards with those gained in others. This is obviously difficult to

achieve on an international basis, as even within national boundaries there are hierarchies of institutions.

In spite of all this sector-wide activity, what we observe in reality is the development of what might be termed 'clusters of trust'. What drives partnership and student exchange development appears from the practitioners' perspective to be of mutual benefit and common interests underpinned by personal relationships and the subsequent building of trust (Huxham, 1996; Vangen and Huxham, 2003; Mattessich and Monsey 1992) rather than the development of cycles and programme descriptors. The development of the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) in 1989 was a potentially significant benefit for staff and students participating in exchange programmes. However this paper questions whether frameworks alone can generate partnerships and educational development. Early initiators of the use of ECTS found that the scheme was helpful in facilitating, at institutional level, the concept and realisation of exchange programme as it protected resources (funding income) to the home institution and enabled the students to gain credits for their study abroad. As the ECTS scheme was based on volume, as expressed by credit, it did not fully address the question of equity of standards or expectations of the study. The basis of successful exchange arrangements was highly dependent on the relationships established at disciplinary level to 'match' curricula, to generate the interests of staff and students in such partnerships, to overcome the inevitable operational issues arising from working in partnership and across cultural boundaries.

Examining further the notion of 'clusters of trust', the experience of those involved indicates that understanding of the curriculum—and in particular of the differing learning, teaching and assessment approaches—is essential in building mutual trust and respect. The understanding of the differing pedagogical approaches, which comes through close working in small-scale networks, is crucial to building confidence about the outcomes and standards achieved by students and cannot be achieved simply by an articulation of level descriptors. It requires clusters of academics, across institutional, country and disciplinary boundaries, to collaborate at programme level to gain this trust and respect for the differing approaches.

For example, in the UK, higher education experience generally expects higher levels of independent study than that of our continental counterparts, with less directed and prescribed reading and more use of projects and team working. This approach is challenging for academics from a more didactic pedagogy to assimilate. There is a reluctance to be confident about the comparability of standards when compared to their experience of pedagogy which is highly

prescriptive and has greater contact hours. Using the ECTS as a framework has assisted in bringing parties together—to get them seriously contemplating partnerships—and supported the early stages of development, but it was only through the building of trust and confidence, acquired from a better understanding of the institutional and cultural differences in approaches, that the partnerships were able to develop further.

The evolution of higher education has taken different routes across the states of Europe, both in terms of the development of those institutions delivering higher education and of the qualifications offered within each nation state. The Bologna agreement has promoted the concept of a trans-Europe higher educational system, within which the comparability of the various cycles of qualifications are articulated and mutual recognition of quality systems is systematic.

Recognising that forms of collaboration and networking are broad and wide ranging, the literature indicates that they need to provide mutual benefit to the organisational network or to the services provided (Huxham, 1996; Wheelen and Hunger, 2000; Yasuda, 2005). Writers exploring collaboration between educational organisations have identified the securing of the supply chain, increased productivity and effectiveness, increased income and reputation as key drivers (Bridges and Husbands, 1996; Boccock and Scott, 1995; Trim 2001; Ayoubi and Al-Habaibeh, 2006; Locke, 2007).

This paper proposes that many of the networks developed across Europe related to student exchange and credit-rated programmes, are motivated by the opportunity for additional income arising from European-funded projects and/or by brand building and reputational gain. The networks of partners are often drawn from those who have mutual respect for each other—often seen as from the same 'league'—as this provides the key players with the highest level of confidence and understanding of the other partners in the short term. In the case of the writers' experiences, this linking of similarly orientated institutions—research intensive, research led, teaching led or mixed economy HE/FE colleges—is a common feature that facilitates the partnership and the formation of the 'cluster of trust'.

A number of factors impact on the choice of partners in realisation of these educational networks. Factors such as the history of the partners (in particular of their previous history of collaboration), leadership status of the network, the extent of mutual respect, the degree of flexibility and the extent of adaptability are significant elements in the formation of many collaborations (Mattessich and Monsey, 1992; Ayoubi and Al-Habaibeh, 2006; Huxham, 1996).

The reputation of the higher education institution, arising out of its mission and history, influences its desire for collaboration as well as its ability to adapt and flex to meet the demands of its partners. During the early years of pan-European cooperation, as far as the UK was concerned, it was the former polytechnics which were at the forefront. Their institutional ambition to build their brands and reputation within the higher education sector, combined with their credit-based and more flexible and transparent curriculum, were key factors in their early involvement. The additional resources, albeit often of a relatively small scale, were necessary to underpin the time and effort of the staff involved and provide for the additional cost associated with the development and operation of these exchange networks. Many of the continental partners involved in these clusters were often ones with a similar heritage to the UK institutions—in some cases they were institutions aspiring to achieve the recognition and degree awarding powers already secured by the polytechnics. This mutual understanding and respect provided for the building of trust within the cluster and for the partnership to identify rapidly the mutual benefits and purpose of the collaboration.

## Conclusion

**CLEARLY** Bologna is changing the landscape of higher education within Europe. Research on collaboration and partnerships within educational settings provides confirmation of the practitioner experience. The legitimacy of such partnerships is engendered by the bureaucratic development of ECTS and Bologna, but is substantially driven by the ability of participating institutions to form of 'clusters of trust'.

The concept of 'trust' has been recognised for some years now as playing an important part in the development of successful networks. It is associated closely with the concept of social capital. Networks are groups of individuals or organi-

sations that engage in reciprocal, preferential, mutually supportive actions. In very general terms social capital is the glue which holds these networks together as a community; social relationships matter and have an economic value.

Within successful 'clusters of trust' developed by universities, what we see are sets of organisations connected through overlapping partnerships. Direct partnerships between individual universities are often reinforced by indirect ties through third-party universities.

Glamorgan Business School has been successful in the participation of building up an effective 'trust cluster' of 24 European institutions from eight countries. This cluster emerged primarily from Erasmus linkages and through further linking with 'partners of partners'. For the most part, the universities within the cluster are of the same 'pedigree' and are actively cooperating within the Bologna Process on the basis of high-trust relationships.

What however are the benefits of the 'cluster of trust'? A number can be recognised, including:

- equivalency of standards and therefore low risk to reputation;
- access to expertise for market/cultural penetration;
- increase in organisational/brand status;
- easily available partners to bid for EU funding opportunities;
- development of new educational products.

The challenge for further research is to identify and measure those factors that lead to successful university clusters within the Bologna area.

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