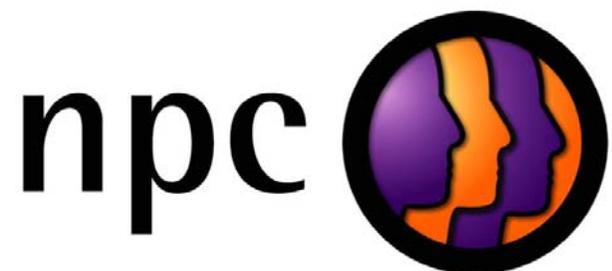


Submission by the National
Postgraduate Committee
of the United Kingdom to
the House of Commons
Education and Skills
Committee Inquiry into The
Bologna Process

December 18th 2006



Executive Summary

The Bologna process was created as a ten year programme which it is nearing its completion. The NPC urges more dissemination of information on the process to staff, institutions and importantly students to engage them in the process. The UK offers diverse and varied higher education experiences through student experience and higher education opportunities. The Bologna Process offers an opportunity for education to benefit society through access and its importance as a public good. Higher Education mobility must be protected to enrich the European knowledge economy.

The National Postgraduate Committee of the United Kingdom

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) represents over 500,000 postgraduate students. It is the principal representative body of postgraduate students in the UK. As a registered charity (no. SC033368), our aim is to promote, in the public interest, postgraduate education in the UK. We share best practice through publications and meetings, respond to consultations, address conferences and take on casework. In the furtherance of our aims, we co-operate with other like-minded democratic student bodies, professional associations and trades unions.

The NPC and the Bologna Process

The National Postgraduate Committee has been a supporter of the Bologna Process both nationally and through EURODOC, the European Council of doctoral candidates and young researchers federation of which the UK is a member (<http://www.eurodoc.net>). The NPC has also been involved in the sector working group on the implementation of the European Charter and Code of Conduct for Researchers in the UK (<http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/resources/gapanalysis.pdf>). The Bologna Process is nearing its completion and the NPC agrees it is timely to reflect on the project and its achievements thus far to ensure its outcomes in making research an attractive career prospect and creating a knowledge economy with the support for all parties involved is achieved.

The NPC welcomes the Bologna Process as it promotes mobility and therefore emphasises the importance that education plays in the social dimension. The process sees Higher Education as a public good and co-operation rather than competition as a part of being a public responsibility.

As part of the NPC's involvement in the Bologna Process we are hosting the Eurodoc Annual Conference which seeks to produce policy outcomes and shape the student led agenda in postgraduate and postdoctoral education. The conference will be taking place between 15 and 17 March in London as a precursor to the next intergovernmental ministerial conference.

The NPC is however concerned that the awareness of the process by students, institutions, staff and employers has not increased during the process. The NPC would welcome a mapping exercise, similar to the UUK European Charter and Code of Conduct, to evaluate the embedding and output of the Bologna Process for stakeholders involved in the UK. The NPC would support the National Union of Students call to establish research into the implementation of the Bologna process and how for example institutions would pass the Diploma Supplement test and the Credit Test for example.

The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process has been a massive success, resulting in agreement throughout Europe and opportunity to develop a knowledge economy, social mobility and sustained public good through investment in Higher Education. The process has furthermore set a standard in a global context which highlights the importance of Higher Education but which presents the process with a need to develop the opportunities for participating countries to remain competitive against other global schemes. This offers a real chance of engagement with all parties in the process and particularly students to ensure that the attainment of learning objectives is facilitated holistically.

Masters Degrees

The question of duration of Masters programmes has been a key issue in considerations of the implications of the Bologna Process. The issue of Masters Degrees in relation to the Third Cycle — Doctoral Programmes will be outlined further below.

The National Postgraduate Committee recognise the variety and range of Masters' degrees in the UK as offering different learning outcomes which offer the opportunity to enrol in doctoral studies programmes. Masters degrees should offer learning outcomes and a variety of opportunity for career development and lifelong learning opportunities but ensure there is an ability to enrol in doctoral programmes.

The National Postgraduate Committee believes it is important that Masters fees are not left to market intervention due to their importance in relation to first and third cycle degrees. While institutions should seek to address the costs of providing Masters programmes, Masters programmes should be regulated to ensure those choosing courses are able to do so based on suitability rather than cost and to ensure that the widening participation agenda is emphasised through all three cycles for the benefit of society and the public good.

The Third Cycle

The National Postgraduate Committee strongly welcomed the introduction of the action line recognising the Third Cycle and welcomes the strong relationship to the first and second cycles.

Doctoral education must be considered in relation to the three Bologna cycles wholly but also to subsequent career stages; research is a core component of the doctorate but there is also a need to consider the development of transferable skills.

We recognise the importance of the link between all cycles and the importance for students of the ability to undertake the third cycle after finishing first or second cycle degrees. The National Postgraduate Committee recognises and welcomes the diversity and opportunity other forms of doctorate offer and will subsequently use the term Doctoral or PhD to represent all doctoral degrees by research or otherwise.

The great diversity of PhD programmes emerging from the changing labour market and employability issues within and external to academia provides a valuable opportunity for societal development and as a catalyst to develop other innovative doctoral programmes such as 'professional' doctorates. This diversity within the aim of mobility within Europe offers great scope to institutions to consider internationalisation within their programmes and institutional development.

The importance of the link between the three cycles extends most importantly to the social and student dimension of the third cycle. There needs to be a link in investment between the three cycles and targeted investment in the third cycle is clearly needed alongside and to support greater equity in challenging gender balance and financial disadvantage. The Second Cycle cannot be left to market forces if the development of equity in gender and finance are to be addressed and the development of new forms of PhD with associated societal benefits are to be seen.

Higher Education Institutions' Roles.

HEIs are aware of their responsibility to ensure doctoral programmes are developed which are of high quality. The Salzburg Principles recognise the key to this ambition is achieving critical mass which requires institutions to develop strategies and policies to create a framework for such a mass.

Institutions must promote attractive career routes for doctoral candidates alongside non-academic sectors to encourage pathways within and outside academia and between academia and non-academic sectors of employment which should support societal and economic development and further strengthen the three cycles. Institutions should also provide information about the requirements of pursuing an academic career if it requires the attainment of further skills such as teaching requirement training. This information and information on doctoral programmes should be available through both preceding cycles.

Furthermore institutions must create attractive conditions to support research by using the European Researchers Charter and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. The development of European Quality Assurance alongside such conditions to ensure attractive research needs to be balanced however by support for institutional

staff using such processes and the increased pressures for students engaged in more levels of quality assurance. Institutions can also support new doctoral students by creating good quality effective PhD training.

Institutions creating critical mass should consider other factors that add to the value for the institution and support the student in the third cycle. The National Postgraduate Committee understands that different solutions may be appropriate for different contexts but these should seek to:

- avoid the isolation of the young researcher, from other disciplines, or from the larger peer group, or the larger scientific community.
- establish transparency of expectations, quality and assessment standards through supervision and viva assessment.
- create synergies regarding generic skills training (at institutional or at inter-institutional level)

The NPC notes the creation of successful, high quality graduate school structures in Europe. There are two variations in such structures but which both provide valuable institutional support for doctoral programmes and students:

- structures including master and doctoral candidates with crosscutting administrative support, or,
- structures including doctoral candidates only, around a research theme, possibly including several institutions.

Access and Admission

The increasingly competitive environment for institutions means it is essential to maintain flexibility in admissions to doctoral programmes. Further flexibility is required due to institutional autonomy itself with the variety in institutional missions and context. There are also initiatives such as Lifelong Learning that compound the need for variety and difference in entry requirements.

The National Postgraduate Committee believes that flexibility of entry requirements is important in addressing the issues of equity in gender and finance together with moving towards a learning outcome based approach for first, second and third level cycles. We support the Bologna commitment that the second cycle gives access, or a right to be considered for admission, to the third cycle but also note that it is important that there should be access possibilities in place for graduates of first cycle programmes if they have the necessary competencies and have met the learning outcomes to continue onto the third cycle.

The National Postgraduate Committee believes that doctoral students should be given the same rights to participation as students in other cycles and the social protection of those

employed in respect to pension provision. Doctoral students are both students and also early career stage researchers. As such they should all have the benefits of access to the facilities of the HEI and to social welfare. The NPC strongly wishes to avoid a two-tier doctoral community of those who are funded receiving more benefits than those self-funding. All doctoral students should have access to secure funding for their studies and living costs, social and health assurance together with student benefits.

Masters Degrees

Second cycle studies should equip students with the necessary competencies in order to undertake research activities and enrol in doctoral studies. These programmes should be learning outcome based, like all three cycles, and should not stipulate the required duration of the programme.

The range and diversity of Masters' degrees in the UK should be seen as an example of the variety of the learning outcome of the second cycle to positively develop career development and lifelong learning opportunities. As outlined earlier, this cycle should not be solely left to market intervention due to its role as part of the first and third cycles.

Improving the Quality of Doctoral Programmes

All awards described as Doctorates should, regardless of type or form, be based on a core minimum level of process and outcomes, and there should be no doctorate without original research. Doctoral programmes should however cater for a variety of purposes.

Two of the goals of the Dublin Descriptors desired outcomes are that students "have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field", and "can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society". The research required of a doctorate can be either basic or applied. The NPC welcomes the diversity that professional doctorates offer as part of the application of research.

Supervision, monitoring and assessment

Institutions must be encouraged and supported in the development and dissemination of good practices in the management of research degrees. Supervision, monitoring and assessment are fundamentally important to the success of research and the student experience, as recognized in the Salzburg principles.

Supervision, monitoring and assessment arrangements should be based upon a transparent contractual framework of shared responsibilities between candidates, supervisors and the institution and where appropriate, partners. These guidelines are crucial to ensure the

student is aware of what to expect from supervisor and to create structures to protect the student from maltreatment.

Students should have more than one supervisor to allow for more contact and engagement in research. They should also have the right to change supervisor without prejudice through restarting research and that they are able to access both male and female supervisors.

Supervision should be competent and supervisors should be trained. There should be mandatory training and performance review of supervisors and continuous professional skills development of academic staff. Supervision is so integral to the success of doctoral programmes that training should be the responsibility of the government or agency and the HEI. Supervisors should be supported and dialogue created to enable facilitation of situations arising as well as to ensure the workload of supervisors is appropriate.

The assessment of doctoral studies should be done by a team that are not those who supervise the doctoral student. The viva should be recorded or independently chaired to support fairness and transparency in the process and aid any complaints or appeals. Assessment by publication should not be a requirement for assessment and should not be required before the assessment.

Generic skills training

Generic skills training is an important part of the third cycle together with the first two cycle study programmes. It should be developed as part of an institutional support structure at doctoral level. The primary goal of institutional structures should be to raise awareness amongst doctoral candidates of the importance of acquiring and communicating such skills, improving their employment prospects. It should also recognize previously acquired skills and seek to highlight how to make them visible in the labour market.

Public responsibility

Doctoral candidates are early stage researchers who are vital to Europe's development, as stated in the Salzburg principles, and should have such rights together with academic structures and career perspectives to enable them to continue to post-doctoral research

If the number of researchers is to rise and be covered by appropriate salaries, the government should invest more into research and social infrastructure for researchers in order to make the UK more attractive within the European Research Area.

Funding

The tenth Salzburg principle is ensuring appropriate and sustainable funding of doctoral programmes and candidates. This is crucial given the crucial role of doctoral research

within global research output, the formative stage of a research career in both academia and non-academic sectors of employment and that the attractiveness of a future career in research is determined largely at the doctoral stage.

Doctoral students require social security and a stable financial situation in order to be able to concentrate on their work and successfully complete it. Specific attention should be paid to visa and permit procedures for families of doctoral students.

It is important that funding for doctoral candidates should cover the full period of the doctoral programme and the full extent of doctoral training including related courses. It is important to indicate a certain timeframe for the duration to support students with non-traditional backgrounds and also to develop the possibilities for part-time doctoral studies and the possibilities to combine doctoral studies with another work. Funding should be sufficiently attractive to encourage suitably qualified candidates from lower income groups as well as sufficiently flexible to support the needs of part time doctoral students and others within the context of lifelong learning.

Funding is however a long-term investment that requires stable and unconditioned funding. A commitment must be recognized and followed by the HEI and government. The government should recognize the link between first and second cycles to the third cycle and research elements being present in all three cycles requiring investment in students from the first day of their studies.

Mobility

Mobility is a key feature of Bologna. UK student mobility is affected by factors including language and student finance but there are also concerns on the mobility of staff and postdoctoral researchers.

Mobility issues particularly affect third cycle students who are not able to gain funding possibilities for research in other countries and research council funding is only available for domicile students in the UK.

Mobility is also a concern for addressing issues of widening participation and gender. All doctoral students should have access to secure funding for their studies and living costs, social and health assurance together with student benefits. The commitment to widening participation and promoting equality of opportunity might also present problems as high quality students are forced to exit in order to provide for themselves financially.

Alongside financial issues in widening participation there is also a need to address social and cultural barriers, particularly with access to doctoral studies. Training for supervisors to make them aware of biases and other perspectives should be mandatory. Students with disabilities should also receive support and individual assessment of needs by the HEI must be undertaken.

Diploma Supplement

The National Postgraduate Committee welcomes the introduction of the Diploma Supplement as a tool for students to recognise their achievements and credits and as a tool to aid mobility. We believe however that employers and institutions need to liaise to recognise what achievement is measured including other holistic information, particularly for postgraduate second and third cycle degrees.

Funding the Three Cycles

Undergraduate Funding

There is a need to consider the three cycles funding relationship and not rely on the market to provide for second cycle programmes and limited financial support for third cycle programmes.

At undergraduate level there are opportunities for horizontal mobility with programmes provided by a student's home country allowing for part of to be studied in another. The awareness of this ability is limited and more UK students would benefit from the mobility experience. Associated funding issues such as childcare grants and other national benefits like social security benefits can be an obstacle as they cannot be paid abroad.

Other EU countries, such as Ireland, offer maintenance for those studying elsewhere and such a scheme should not be administratively burdensome (http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/student_financial_support.pdf?language=EN). Alternatively, an ESIB supported idea is for the host country to finance the fees and living costs of students. This would be dependent on reciprocal agreements with other EU countries and issues such as social security benefits to be addressed.

Masters Funding

As noted previously, leaving Masters fees to the market is undesirable due to their importance in the three cycles and as a link to both third cycle programmes but also to life-long learning and continuing professional development. The National Postgraduate Committee would recommend the extension of the undergraduate loans scheme to enable those with competencies to be able to complete Masters programmes.

There are also increased concerns on fees at Masters level and combined undergraduate and masters programmes to enable students to continue onto third cycle programmes. The EPSRC notes the potential impact of accumulating 'undergraduate debt in engineering which it estimates to be 20% higher than the average and substantially higher than the arts' presumably reflecting the length of programmes.

The common perception that most postgraduates come straight from their undergraduate courses is misleading. Most entrants to all types of postgraduate course are older than 22 and there are more first-year postgraduates above the age of 30 than below the age of

25. Part-time students tend to be older still, most being over 30. The over-30s constitute a substantial majority among part-time students starting every type of postgraduate course.

Doctoral Programme Funding

The appropriate and sustainable funding of doctoral programmes is a principle of the Salzburg principles. It is integrally related to the earlier two cycles with growing student debt and increases in undergraduate fees placing a renewed emphasis on financial rewards as an attraction to careers in research. Ackers 2006 report on *Assessing the impact of the Roberts Review Enhanced Stipends and Salaries on Postgraduate and Postdoctoral Positions* noted that pay is a dimension shaping the relative attractiveness of academic research careers and is concerned primarily to encourage researchers to progress and remain within the UK academic sector (<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/researchcareers/summary-stipend.pdf>).

Furthermore as noted above, Doctoral students require social security and a stable financial situation in order to concentrate on their work and successfully complete it. Funding should be sufficiently attractive to encourage suitably qualified candidates from lower income groups as well as sufficiently flexible to support the needs of part time doctoral students and others within the context of lifelong learning.

Research in the UK shows that students from groups at a disadvantage tend to enrol in lower level, shorter or more vocational courses, and closer to home. (Callender, 2003 and 2002; M Farr 'Home or Away?' 2001 quoted in Callender, 2003)

A large proportion of postgraduates are self-funding and prospects for growth amongst home students depends on this number increasing. An extension of the students loans scheme to cover those not able to gain funding and Research Council Funding for students for EU study would seek to address the decline in domicile students.

Conclusion

The Bologna Process has been successful and the UK government must continue to play a leading part in the successor development from the process. There must however be a greater dissemination of the process to and engagement with all stakeholders.

To facilitate the development of the process we would argue that the successor process establishes a permanent secretariat and widens its participation and transparency to make substantial developments on the knowledge economy and social development through Higher Education.

Recommendations

- Agency led training co-ordination for supervisors and recognition of importance of supervision to successful completion of doctoral research.
- Increased awareness training and publicity for Higher Education Staff about the implications of Bologna.
- Institutional evaluation of Bologna Implementation, specifically on Diploma Supplements and Credit worth.
- Extension of scrutiny by Select Committee on lifelong learning and its concern with student funding, accreditation of prior learning, and student participation.