

## THE BOLOGNA AGREEMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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### Abstract

More than 30 countries currently participate in the Bologna agreement which was initially signed by the European Union member-states in 1999. Many more states, including the Central Asian nations, are considering joining the agreement that will create a universal system of higher education in Europe by 2008. This article first outlines the essentials of the Bologna agreement and, secondly, analyses the effects on the Central Asian universities of joining the agreement.

### Key features of the Bologna agreement

Europe is striving to achieve integration to create awareness for common values and a sense of belonging to a common social and cultural space. Ensuring that European universities promote mobility of students and professors and provide qualifications that are tailored to a job market is a key for achieving this goal. The latter is the special subject of the Bologna agreement that includes the following main components.

#### 1. Introduction of comparable qualifications and degrees

The goal is to introduce an educational system that consists of two cycles: undergraduate and graduate. The undergraduate cycle ends with a bachelor's degree that requires at least three years of studies. The Bologna agreement stresses that a bachelor's degree must be relevant to the requirements of the economy and the job market. Successful completion of the first cycle is a prerequisite for admission to the second cycle – graduate studies that lead to a master's or doctorate degree.

#### 2. Introduction of a system of credits

Each master or bachelor program has to be split into a range of courses. Each course will be assigned a certain number of credits (credit hours). This will enable comparison of courses offered by different universities and the transferring of course credits completed at one university to another<sup>2</sup>. As a result, the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) will be established. A student can collect credits from different universities, transfer

them to a participating university at which the student is completing studies and these credits will count toward a degree. As far as acceptable by universities, students should also be able to collect credits from outside of an institution of higher education. This will promote a high mobility of students providing them with an opportunity to compare programs at different universities and switch easily from one university to another that better meets their needs and expectations.

#### 3. Elimination of mobility hindrances

At the moment there are a number of obstacles restricting international mobility. For example, these are problems with residence and work permits for students and teachers. In this area regulations must be simplified and free of bureaucracy.

#### 4. Guaranteed uniform inter-state quality assurance

The introduction of bachelor, master and doctorate degrees will be complemented by an accreditation system run by a European accreditation council. The objective of the accreditation is to guarantee minimum standards related to the contents of a program and to ensure the job relevance of the degrees. The accreditation is mainly done by agencies based in different countries and with different specialization. For example, a non-government agency in one country may be in charge of accrediting university programs of that or any other country in the field of business administration. A single course is accredited based on peer review. The European inter-state accreditation council accredits the agencies.

### Effects of entry in the Bologna agreement on Central Asian countries

The European Union welcomes the entry of other countries in the Bologna agreement. If Central Asian nations join the Bologna agreement the effects can be separated into three areas: effects on universities, students and teachers. Since all three of them influence each other they will be analysed together.

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<sup>2</sup> In the U.S. universities that use the system of credits for many years each course is usually three or four credits that is a course meets 3 or 4 hours a week during a semester.

This analysis has rather practical meaning for Central Asia. More than 16 universities in Kazakhstan currently are participating in the pilot program with the purpose of ensuring transition to a credit hour system. In Kyrgyzstan, 13 universities were selected to participate in the similar project. Also, in Kyrgyzstan the Ministry of Education and Culture leads the nation's effort to join the Bologna agreement in the near future. There is also substantial interest in the Bologna agreement and transition to a credit hour system in Uzbekistan.

Critics of higher education in Central Asia usually focus on such issues as a lack of qualified professors, elements of corruption, poor equipment and facilities and low quality of academic programs that often do not meet the requirements of employers of university graduates. While the governments sometimes ignore weak spots e.g. that an MBA degree is offered by state or private university despite considerable drawbacks, in the future it will no longer be possible for participating universities to offer a degree without international accreditation. This will lead to a compulsory increase in the quality of teaching. All accredited participating universities will have to improve their programs and instruction, at least to the required minimum level. There is a high probability that some universities may not receive the accreditation. For example, because of the lack of qualified teachers, poor library and computer resources or unstable financial position. Many universities in Central Asia will be in greater need for equipment, textbooks, government and private funds as well as grants from both national and foreign organizations to fulfil the accreditation requirements and improve the quality of their programs. All those that have better sources of funding including money from the government will get higher chances of getting accredited. Also, orientation on the requirements of private businesses, especially for the bachelor courses, will present a challenge to some Central Asian universities.

In the future, when the students have higher mobility, it will be easier for them to switch universities during their studies. So they cannot be bound as easily as before to a university that they had originally chosen. If a university wants to keep and increase the number of students, the satisfaction of their needs and their satisfaction as a customer of the university is a key to success. There will be higher competition among the universities to keep or gain customers. Assuming that students are interested in a world class education, the growing competition will lead to an increasing quality of academic programs.

If switching the universities also becomes easier for lecturers, it will also increase the competition between universities for better-trained personnel. Professors can specialize more and more as long as students and

universities present the demand for their subjects. If a university has high reputation due to its lecturers it may gain more students who are attracted by unique courses and high quality of instruction. In turn, the university requires more well-trained lecturers in order to satisfy students' needs. There is a certain danger of self-growing processes that may lead to few very good universities and many of medium or low quality, something that can be seen in the U.S. A positive side effect is that the overall quality will increase.

Furthermore, it is likely that international cooperation between accredited universities will become much easier and more intensive than today. By accreditation, any reservations about quality can be dispelled which makes Central Asian universities more attractive as partners for American or European universities. Having received the accreditation, Central Asian universities will remove the (potential) doubts regarding the quality of their educational programs because foreign universities will be convinced that a minimum level of quality is guaranteed.

The universities will most likely enjoy a larger number of international students who may come to Central Asia attracted by the accreditation and guaranteed standards of quality. This perfectly coincides with the intentions of the Bologna agreement to promote mobility and international student exchange.

As Central Asian economies become more open and commercial, foreign companies will be engaged in increasing cooperation and trade with the region and will require a workforce with educational degrees tailored to this specific market. Private foreign businesses therefore might be more interested in employing people who have experience in or with Central Asia. This might be, for example, German students who studied in Central Asia or people from Central Asia who studied abroad. Because students are increasingly concerned with the opportunities for employment after the completion of their studies and their suitability for a job, they would be more likely to study in Central Asia (if they are foreign students) or to study abroad (if they are Central Asian students). In turn, these internationally experienced and internationally educated students will promote economic growth in Central Asia. Thus, participating universities will be engaged in and foster trade capacity-building that is an essential feature of globalisation in the modern world.

The coming intensification of competition does not refer to Central Asia only. The competition for students and lecturers will take place on an international level. This gives a realistic chance to attract students and professors from foreign countries to Central Asian universities. The main challenge for universities is the increasing competition that they will all have to prepare for: