

Bologna and the Social Dimension – Lost in Translation?

Professor John Storan

University of East London, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: j.storan@uel.ac.uk

Abstract: *This summary paper has been adapted for publication from a keynote speech given by the author at the Bologna Process Anniversary Conference on the 24th – 25th June 2019. The paper offers an overview of the Bologna process and also explores the social dimension highlighting and commenting on the progress made in this area of Bologna as well as the challenges that lay ahead in realizing the promise of the social dimension and the wider social benefits of the European Higher Education Area*

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I would like to begin by thanking the conference organisers for the invitation to contribute to this Bologna Anniversary event. I am delighted to participate and to have the opportunity to share with you some thoughts, reflections and brief comments on the Bologna process and in particular, the Social dimension aspect of the process.

This contribution to the event started life as a joint paper presentation with my two co-authors Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt and Robert Napier who are the joint Chairs of the current Social Dimension Advisory Group of which I am also a member. The organising committee then asked for the paper to be given as a keynote so here we are. I will be looking at some of the issues noted in our original abstract but only some. As I won't have time to explore these in any great detail here I would like to invite you to contact me with any points and comments you may have and I will be delighted to feed these into the ongoing discussions of the Social Dimension Advisory Group as it works towards delivering its mandate which I shall come back to in due course. Facilitating an open dialogue in respect of the work of the advisory group is a very important way of drawing on the wider body of knowledge and practice relating to the social dimension. I will give you my contact details at the end of this paper for your comments.

The title for this paper is “Bologna and the Social Dimension – Lost in translation?” In using the word translation I want to suggest that part of the ongoing challenge for the social dimension involves a significant degree of translation and for that matter, interpretation. For example the challenge of translating the defining features of the social dimension into policy and practice has been part of the work of successive social dimension working groups over the years. This has not been a linear or incremental process but rather as we shall see a fairly uneven one with valuable points of progress over the period that the Bologna process has been operating. I shall point out some of these issues as we explore the Bologna process and social dimension.

Given the limits on the paper I will confine my commentary efforts to three areas of discussion. First, I will make a few remarks by way of a highly edited overview on the Bologna process itself. I am sure I have missed things out but hopefully for those of you not familiar with the Bologna process it will at least provide a starting point. Many apologies in advance to any Bologna historians and experts as my overview remarks will be at best a scene setting exercise and at worst a quick run through my personal selection of the key features of the Bologna process. In this sense, I am less of a Bologna scholar and

much more a participant observer with a particular interest in the “public good and wider benefits of higher education” which I believe in very strongly. I increasingly realise that the Bologna process is very complex and as a participant in co-operation with other colleagues my involvement is just in one part of the current cycle only. So therefore I will confine my comments to this.

My second area of discussion will focus on some of the social dimension aspects of the Bologna process and for this I will be drawing on a combination of documentary sources but mainly a selection of relevant Ministerial Communiques which make reference to the social dimension as well as some of the working papers from the Bologna follow up group (BFUG) and the advisory groups that form a key part of the working arrangements for each iteration of the process.

Finally, I will set out and also make a few remarks about the terms of reference for the current Advisory Group for the Social dimension.

The outputs from this group will feed into the deliberations for the 2020 Ministerial Communique and therefore help shape the growing body of knowledge and practice in this crucial aspect of Bologna.

Before I come to the three areas of discussion let preface this by giving you some background on me and my roles and responsibilities as this might also give you a clue as to where I am coming from in my understanding and views on the social dimension. Like most of us these days I have multiple roles and responsibilities. My day job is at the University of East London (UEL) where I am Director of Continuum – The Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies. This is a research and development centre established in 2003 which undertakes a variety of research and near policy studies often in collaboration with both local and international partners. The centre for example has been commissioned by the London Councils representative body to provide a series of longitudinal studies on the Journey of Young London Learners to Higher Education (London Councils 2018) and amongst other things to look at the social dimensions of these journeys. At a regional and national level this work has raised important questions which are directly relevant to the Bologna process in relation to the origins and destinations of learners progressing to Higher Education. I will come back to the theme of widening participation later as it has been and is an influential umbrella term connected to the social dimension often with reference to national level policies and strategies.

The University of East London has a mission which is driven by its long term commitment to widening access and participation for more and different learners from communities throughout East London and beyond. My university is therefore very much an “anchor institution” in the region providing higher education opportunities to amazingly diverse communities of learners in some of the poorest parts of London, which often have low levels of higher education access participation and progression.

Complementing my role at UEL I am also a guest Professor at Malmo University, Sweden where I work on a number of higher education widening access and participation research and development projects and related initiatives. This role has also led to a healthy and productive knowledge exchange and wider co-operation being developed between the two universities focusing on social dimension type issues and concerns in relation to inclusion, partnership working and City/University co-operation. This is much in the spirit of Bologna co-operation.

Thirdly, I am Chair of FACE – The Forum for Access and Continuing Education. This is a professional network which supports and represents widening participation practitioners from across the UK and which also has strong links with sister networks internationally.

Finally and of particular relevance as I mentioned I am the UK representative on the Bologna Advisory Group Social Dimensions 2018-2020 and I also previously served as the UK rep on the Social Dimension and Lifelong learning working group from 2014-2015. I will draw on my experiential learning of working in these groups throughout this paper. Turning to my first area for discussion let me offer a brief reminder and overview of some of the main features of the Bologna process.

The first point to make is that it is based on an intergovernmental cooperation structure which is comprised of 48 participating countries together with the European Commission. There are also a number of consultative members and representatives from the national ministries in addition to colleagues from student and staff bodies and stakeholder groups in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and so on. The specific composition of the various thematic and advisory groups changes with each cycle of the Bologna process to reflect the areas and priorities in the ministerial communiqués, which in turn frames the mandate for such groups. Oversight and management of this process is the responsibility of the BFUG which includes representation from the EHEA members.

So what were the founding concerns of the Bologna process? Firstly, it is important to note that the Bologna declaration which I strongly urge you to read if you haven't done so was preceded and informed by the Sorbonne joint declaration which was produced a year before the Bologna declaration in 1998. Substantive sections of this declaration were taken up in the Bologna declaration including those relating to the social dimension. The Bologna declaration itself was signed by 29 European countries in 1999 and makes reference to a number of what have since become familiar features across the EHEA landscape. Such as a credit transfer system, student/staff mobility, common structure for academic qualifications and so forth. Importantly the declaration highlighted a commitment to Educational co-operation noting this form of working can contribute to peaceful, stable and democratic societies. Certainly in the two working groups I have been a member of there has been a strong culture of cooperation between members. We should not underestimate the value and impact that such co-operation makes to the quality of work undertaken in the various advisory groups. The social dimension incidentally is mentioned in the very first paragraph of the declaration, so it was very much one of the overarching themes of the declaration.

How has the Bologna process been progressed?

Two phases to the Bologna process with Phase 1 from 1999 – 2010 often characterised as the structural phase in which the setting up of the EHEA took place underpinned by the aim of creating a compatible system of higher education with a common structure of qualifications and so on.

Phase 2- 2010 – 2020 sometimes referred to as the phase of consolidation building on the EHEA as well as a range of social dimension type developments such as inclusion, widening access and participation in HE and supporting student success as well as promoting the wider mobility of students and staff. So from this we can begin to see the way that aspects of the social dimension are part of an ongoing process which is intermittent as we shall see. This is a process which includes the domains of practice, research and policy and pays particular attention to the connection between these three domains.

Moving on to the organisational features of Bologna

Essentially each cycle of the Bologna process comprises of a ministerial meeting every second year supported by the BFUG. A major output from this is the Ministerial Communiqué signed off by the member countries. The BFUG has the responsibility to progress the commitments made in the communiqué and it does this through the appointment of a series working and advisory groups which in turn are tasked with progressing the specific terms of reference framed by the BFUG

and agreed by the Ministerial group. The BFUG meets at least every 6 months and is supported by a secretariat drawn from the country which is hosting the Ministerial meeting for that particular cycle. As Italy is host for this cycle the next Ministerial level meeting will take place in Rome in 2020. So the work plans and terms of reference for each of the current themes including the social dimensions are presently being worked on by a series of groups with oversight from the BFUG. The groups will present their reports and related papers in time for the Rome 2020 ministerial meeting and communicate. Let me now turn to my second discussion area the social dimension and offer some brief comments of where this fits into the Bologna process. Various commentators have identified the social dimension as being a “moving target” within the Bologna process. What this tends to mean in practice is that there has been variable degrees of emphasis and attention given to the social dimension in the different communiqués over time. So, in some instances the social dimension features prominently and others much less so. Given this in the next few paragraphs I shall attempt to highlight this moving target aspect by drawing on a brief textual analysis of references made in a sample of Ministerial Communiqués and related developments across the two phases of Bologna I noted earlier.

If we go back to the original Bologna declaration we find the social dimension is included in a list of key influential factors at the very start of the declaration itself. From its positioning in the text it seems to be the case that the social dimension was regarded to be an overarching theme and part of the vision to create what is described in the declaration as ‘part of a growing awareness’ in the public, academic and political spheres of the need to establish a more complete and far-reaching Europe. The social dimension being foregrounded as a critical feature of this vision of a Europe which as the declaration goes on to say “is building upon and strengthening its intellectual, cultural, social and scientific and technological dimension”. This particular vision of a social Europe has of course been changing and this in turn has had consequences for the social dimension and how it contributes to the wider changes across the EHEA.

By the time of the Berlin Ministerial meeting in (2003) and Bergen in (2005) we see that the language and position of the social dimension has shifted. So for example in the case of the Berlin Communiqué there is a call to improve the “social characteristics” of the EHEA as a way of balancing the increased emphasis on competitiveness in the EHEA. The Bergen communiqué offers in contrast to previous communiqué standards a rather detailed description of the social dimension. It refers to the measures taken by governments which includes help to students especially from socially disadvantaged groups. The help being provided includes financial as well as guidance and counselling relating to accessing HE. As a number of commentators here have pointed out care needs to be taken not to create a deficit model of the very learners that are being focused on supported to access and excel in Higher Education.

When we reach the London communiqué in 2007 we arguably find the most detailed and concrete definition of the social dimension so far. So for example the London communiqué talks about:

That the student body entering HE should reflect all our populations and the role of Student services also it uses Widening participation and equal opportunities discourses and terminology.

Although there have been several iterations of the social dimension in subsequent communiqués the London formulation marks a step change in attempts to define the social dimension and it has had a significant influence on subsequent communiqués as well as the current work plan of the social dimension advisory group which has adopted this definition in its work. We can also see strong echoes in the national widening participation plans and strategies in a number of EHEA member countries. The take up and implementation of social dimension proposals and developments in EHEA member states has been explored in for example the work of the PL4SD project which undertook a mapping exercise of WP

strategies across Bologna members countries. This suggests that there is considerable positive interaction between the Bologna process and its pronouncements concerning the Social Dimension and national and institutional policy developments across the EHEA.

This mutual engagement and cooperation has also been proactively supported by the various social dimension advisory groups over time.

So the London Communique defines the social dimension in relation to who goes to HE, participates in it and completes their HE studies. Furthermore, this definition also recognises the structural and operational challenges this involves when it identifies the need to create flexible learning pathways into (Access) and within higher education (Progression).

This interpretation of the social dimension also recognises the equal opportunity and widening participation imperatives at all HE levels (eg undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies).

I am now going to move to the final discussion area by fast-forwarding a decade to the 2018 Paris Communique. Here we can also see a strong alignment with the London Communique both in language and intent. Specifically the ministers acknowledged and agreed that the following needs to be addressed by the 2020 Ministers meeting.

1. Social dimension needs to be strengthened
2. HE student population reflects the diversity of Europe's populations
3. A common understanding of the social dimension needs to be developed.

Before I conclude this short paper let me set out the terms of reference for the current Social Dimension Advisory Group moving forward to the next ministerial meeting for the Bologna process which will take place in Rome in the summer of 2020:

1. To develop a common understanding of the concept of social dimension within the BFUG.
2. To develop proposed principles and guidelines for the social dimension of higher education within the EHEA and to submit these, through the BFUG, to the 2020 Ministerial conference for adoption.
3. To gather and examine data on good practices in the field of social dimension, drawing on previously agreed commitments and existing data.
4. To explore the scope for EHEA cooperation to strengthen the social dimension of higher education.
5. To begin working on Peer Learning Activities within the Social Dimension sphere.

In many ways, these terms of reference capture and embed the essence of the Bologna process and specifically the social dimension aspect. In doing so they also provide an important set of challenges to the EHEA members going forward beyond 2020. These challenges include the following:

- Data collection and comparison at national level
- Different understandings of the social dimension between countries and within the HEIs
- Divergence between Bologna objectives and national objectives in social dimension policies
- Consistency of monitoring arrangements

These ongoing challenges form part of the backdrop for the Advisory Group for the Social Dimension and are currently being progressed through the group's Terms of reference.

If you would like to comment on this summary paper and/or the TORs and challenges that I have noted please email your comments to me at: j.storan@uel.ac.uk