

Higher education ministers must be more transparent in their discussions on transnational initiatives like the Bologna Process. The wider public need to hear about its problems – and its successes.

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The decade long Bologna Process, which aims to make academic standards comparable across Europe, has remained relatively uninteresting to and uncommented on by the media and the European public. [Anne Corbett](#) argues that despite Bologna's achievements, this lack of interest outside policy-making circles has led to gaps in the political process; gaps which lie in the lack of informed analysis and effective public advocacy for the Process.



This Thursday and Friday, higher education ministers from 47 European countries are meeting in Bucharest. They will be assessing the progress in creating the transnational compatibility which will give meaning to the European Higher Education Area, and they will agree on what comes next in the Bologna Process, the process which aims to make academic standards comparable across Europe. Welcome to the silo.

Everyone institutionally involved with European and international higher education cooperation (a hundred ministerial delegations and 30 international organisations) will be at this giant Bologna meeting, housed in the Romanian Parliament. These include stakeholder bodies involved in Bologna policy making; the European University Association, representing university leadership, the European Students Union and the Council of Europe will be especially prominent. Alongside will be representatives from interested non-European countries, who meet in the Bologna Policy Forum now that Bologna is a global brand.

My colleague Sacha Garben has [thrown a few bricks at this silo](#) of Bologna. She argues that the Bologna Process and EU higher education cooperation are undemocratic because ministers, working in an intergovernmental process, do not have to answer to the European institutions which guarantee parliamentary and legal oversight. Her solution is to make higher education subject to an EU Directive. This would incorporate the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice as parts of the process. I support her in some metaphorical brick throwing. If there are significant challenges to the status quo, issues become too important to be left to the policy community alone. But as a political scientist and historian, I come from a different disciplinary perspective than Garben and I take a different stand on the solution.

For me the democratic issue raised by the Bologna Process is not one of (non) compliance with law but rather of gaps in the political process. I see the silo issue in terms of whether there can be the political and sectoral mobilisation that breaches the monopoly of the elite policy-making community on issues such as this. In other words how do we give to give the Bologna Process some mass and media appeal? Political science theory suggests that policy monopolies only get broken, or silos breached, when there is an interest from the media which makes politicians sit up, and leads to a change of agenda.

So how does this apply to the student protests against 'neo-liberal values' which they claim are driven by the Bologna Process, the academic complaints that Bologna reforms have caused them to dumb down their courses, and, not least, the general ignorance of the roles of the EU and Bologna, prominently on display in the batch of recent UK [books](#) in defence of the public university?

They are still marginal. The Bologna Process is seen as a political success so there has been no incentive for change. It is the case that it has many technical achievements to its credit that are changing European higher education. Almost all nations on the European continent (the 27 EU and 20 non-EU members) have remodelled their degree structures to conform to the bachelor, masters and doctorate pattern that makes

mobility and international recognition easier. Europe's higher education systems have, or will have, quality assurance systems and quality assurance agencies that are consistent with overall guidelines on processes. Most are working to national qualifications frameworks in line with a European model. Bologna's advocates claim that this encourages both emulation and peer-learning, and that this makes the higher education systems of the continent more globally attractive as a whole. In consequence the Bologna Process gets away with being opaque in its policy-making for higher education, indeed much more opaque than the EU which views higher education as part of its growth and innovation strategy.

If Bologna were to become publicly more interesting it would need far more public advocacy and far more independent analysis. One hitch to opening up this policy area has been the lack of a critical tradition of research, as opposed to the policy work done for Bologna actors. But a policy network is building up and doctoral students are emerging. We may well be seeing soon some well-researched answers to some of the questions which underlie protest, and which have hitherto been ignored. For example: illuminating the issues of winners and losers in the Europeanisation process (such as the concentration of researchers who hold the prestigious [European Research Council](#) grants); the feebleness of compensatory efforts to open up equal opportunities; and on a different level, the strange application of criteria for accepting and refusing Bologna membership. As such they could be a bridge between policy-making and the street.

Public advocacy for the university in its European context is, as yet, more of a challenge. Those outside the Bologna bubble are still looking for the modern day Erasmus or Voltaire or Newton ready with the core scientific or philosophical arguments in praise of the principles of higher education and society's case for the strong university – something to break with the dominance of managerial arguments on efficiency and cost, of targets and benchmarking

In the current politically contentious context Europe can't be made without Europeans. Is it not mad to keep Europe's citizens in ignorance of the potential of a European achievement with a direct impact on at least half them and a fundamental impact on the kinds of society we live in?

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