

## **Contexts, challenges, changes: the Bologna Process and “Ping-Pong”.**

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### **Abstract**

Where has the European Higher Education arrived at in January 2013? Where is it going? What are the links between it and other major systems of higher education, in particular the United States? What is happening to higher education in terms of links to employability, international comparisons, costs etc.?

### **Introduction**

The development of the Bologna Process and the EHEA are well documented<sup>1</sup>. Not surprisingly there are many shades of opinion (possibly 50). However, “trans-Atlantic ping pong”<sup>2</sup> remains as one of the best games in town, linking the thought, analysis, development, exchange of ideas between the EHEA and the United States in continuing to search for enhancement to knowledge based economies. The two overarching shorthand names for these diverse meta-systems masks the similarities and realities that exist (47 states/50 states, each with 4000+ higher education institutions, forms of accreditation, types of institution including public, private not for profit, private for profit, religious, 2 year/4 year etc) do not give justice to the wealth of provision.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info) and [www.eua.be](http://www.eua.be) for firstly "the official view" and secondly an assessment by the European University Association. Also: Birtwistle T. - Towards 2010 (and then beyond) - the context of the Bologna Process, article in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy, Practice* Vol16:1 pages 55-63 March 2009 published by Routledge

<sup>2</sup> ‘Trans-Atlantic Ping-Pong and the Bologna Process’ (with H.H.McKiernan) EAIE/EUA Bologna Handbook, summer 2011, Raabe Fachverlag, Berlin

Looking back, because of course hindsight is such an aid to clarity of thought and analysis, we could all foresee the economic meltdown and the consequent impact that this would have on higher education across so many parts of the world. This has had an impact on budgets; impact on stakeholders; impact on students, employment prospects, choice of major or degree, desire and need to complete, thirst for what might be seen as value for money and rates of satisfaction. Both the demand and supply side of higher education have felt the impact. Both the provider and the learner have felt the impact. These disturbances have been heaped upon what, for many, were already systems in a state of flux.

If we analyse data that exists to guide our policy decisions, having established the goals sought, then we surely stand a better chance of arriving at good outcomes reached through sound processes. The EHEA with its determined focus on change for a purpose gives an ideal focal point for this. If on top of that we look at the “ping-pong” effect this superimposes a level of analysis that links directly to the US systems of higher education.

The global context includes changes in Australia, New Zealand, China, India, Canada, Russia, Japan, South Africa, many countries in Latin America, across Africa, the southern Mediterranean and so on. These changes include the obvious constraints on spending in many parts of the world, demographics (Europe with a declining population and the southern Mediterranean with an increasing population), adoption of qualification frameworks (second generation as in Australia, Scotland, England and Wales, Ireland, South Africa etc, first generation as in much of the EHEA and with the beta pilot<sup>3</sup> in parts of the USA etc), use of Tuning methodology linked to frameworks, credits and learning (EHEA, Russia, much of Latin America, much of Africa, parts of the USA<sup>4</sup>, parts of Canada, Australia, Japan, etc), quality mechanisms and approaches (EHEA, Australia, South Africa, China, India, etc). And so it goes on – similar problems, challenges, contexts, met by, in many cases, similar approaches to change.

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org), Degree Qualifications Profile, accessed at 26/09/2012

<sup>4</sup> See [www.tuningusa.org](http://www.tuningusa.org), accessed 26/09/2012

These do affect all aspects of higher education – exchange programmes, joint programmes, global outreach, recruitment, academic freedom, academic staff (faculty) recruitment, funding, relationships with stakeholders etc.

## Contexts

There are many data sets which add to the debate about higher education, mainly national ones (for example census results or specific research project results). To give a much broader context there are specifically international data sets such as those listed at the Harvard “Selected resources for international education statistics”<sup>5</sup> which has the OECD data (Education at a glance 2012 at [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)) at the top of the list. The OECD data are far reaching but, *inter alia*, confirms that the graduate premium (enhanced earnings due to high level qualifications) remains significant and that those with higher education come out of a recession faster (if they lost their job they get another job, if they kept their job their earnings rise) than those without. This varies from country to country but it matches ‘The College Advantage’ (Carnevale, August 2012, Georgetown University) claimed for the United States.

How do short term labour market benefits match up to the deferred income and career gains of the graduate? In the much lauded German system of post secondary education with lower participation rates in higher education than many countries, excellent credentials and training at the technician level, relatively vibrant economy and earnings finds a crossover point at about age 40 – those with higher education kick on in their career and are much sought after (a scarce resource) whilst those without, plateau. Projections (from OECD and others) indicate an increasingly bi-modal labour market – high end jobs for those with higher qualifications and low end jobs (requiring presence – service industry etc) with the “middle” disappearing fairly rapidly.

The cost of higher education in various countries is also exposed, as well as how different funding models can disguise the true cost (figure 1). What may appear “free” (Group 1) may in reality cost (the country) as much as direct/indirect

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.gse.harvard.edu](http://www.gse.harvard.edu) accessed 26/09/2012, note the latest OECD data is 2012.

personal contribution to costs (Group 2). This, given the difficulties that many find themselves in financially, affects higher education and the perceptions that potential students and fund providers (private or public) have:

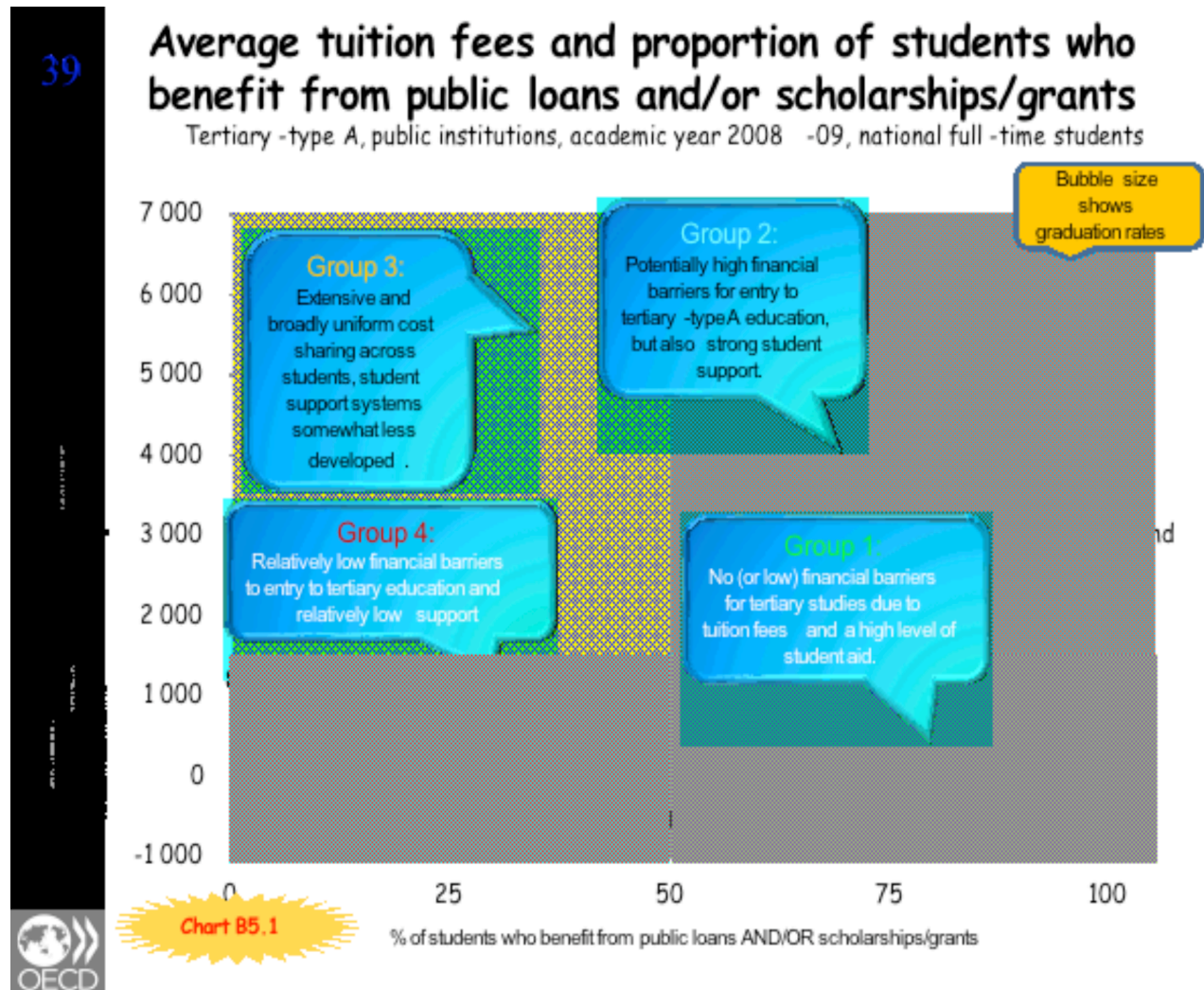


Figure 1: from Education at a Glance 2012 and the presentation by Andreas Schleicher at the IMHE Conference, September 2012.

Other things are also changing, including the market share of countries for mobile students (Figure 2), thus changing the dynamics of higher education and the “brain drain”/“brain circulation” debate. The traditionally main players in this

activity are increasingly facing competition in different ways from different parts of the globe:

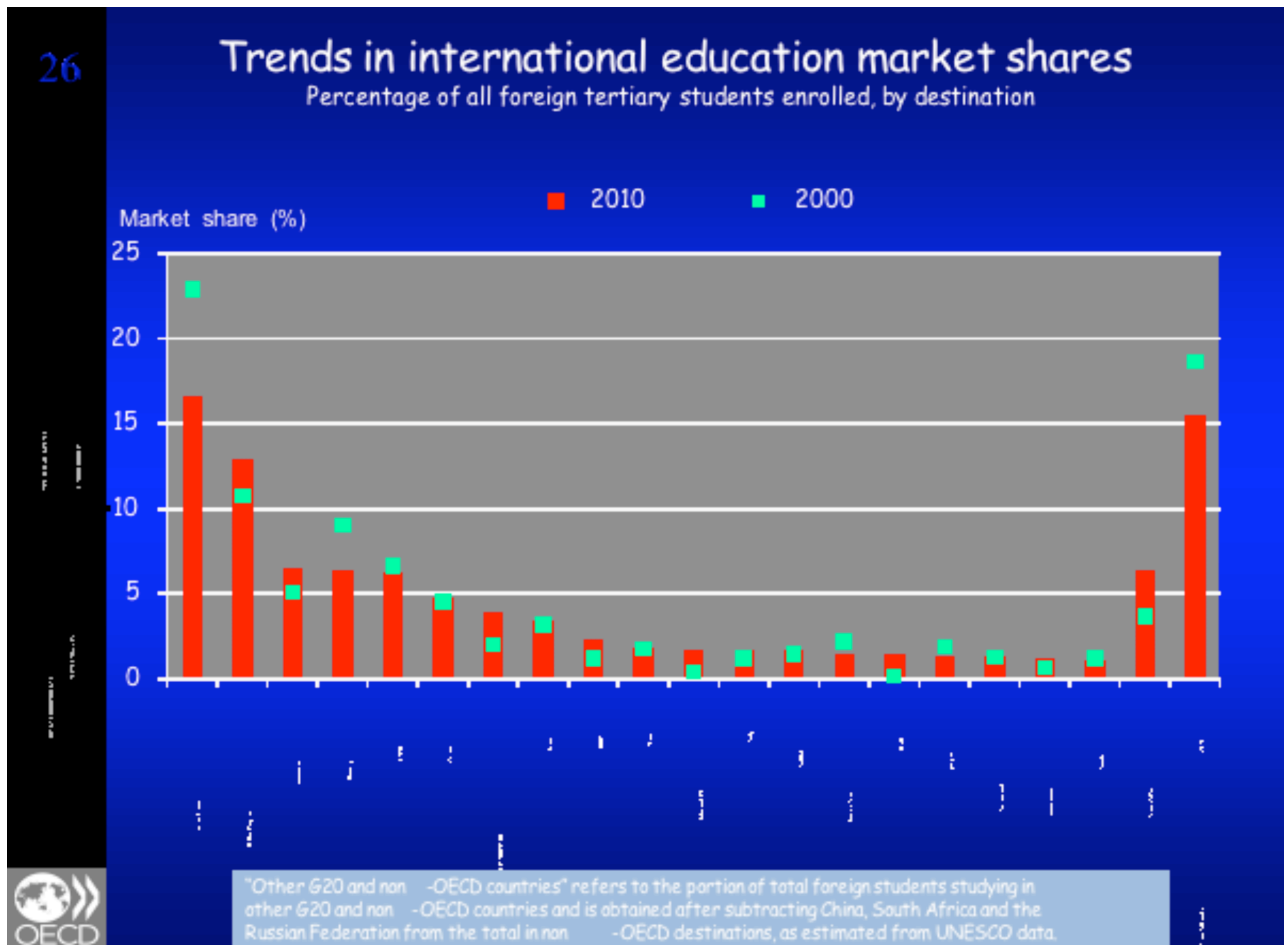


Figure 2: per Andreas Schleicher *supra* Figure 1.

There is also the apparent dichotomy regarding unemployment and a skills shortage (Figure 3). This must be coupled with skills for tomorrow as opposed to jobs today and also the categorisation of education, training and skills.

Perceptions of the role of higher education may have changed and may have been exacerbated by the financial difficulties many face:

# Skills shortages and unemployment coexist

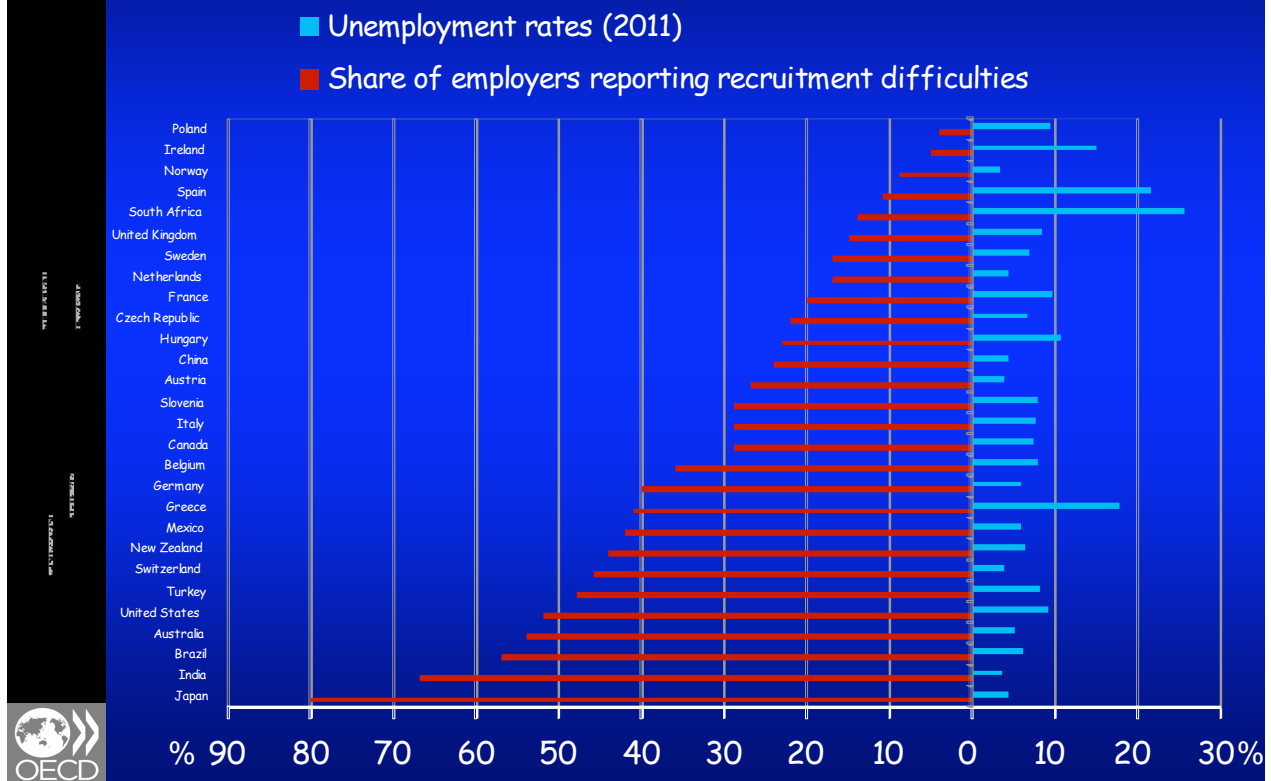


Figure 3: Schleicher *supra*.

Some of the data available may be challenged because of methodology, but the trends are very plain.

Across the world similar challenges and, largely, similar approaches to change.

## Challenges (EHEA)

In April 2012 the EHEA Ministerial Conference took place in Bucharest (the next such meeting will be in Armenia in 2015) and “took stock of the achievements of the Bologna Process”<sup>6</sup> whilst also agreeing on “future priorities of the EHEA” – looking back and looking forward. The preface to the statement acknowledges the “economic and financial crisis” and that “higher education is an important part of

<sup>6</sup> See EHEA Bucharest Communiqué at [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info) accessed 25/09/2012

the solution” requiring “Strong and accountable higher education systems [to] provide the foundations for thriving knowledge societies”. The changes that have taken place since the inception of the Bologna Process in 1999 have, by most yardsticks, been remarkable. What are the headlines from the Communiqué? The themes may seem familiar as outlined:

“ However, as the report on the implementation of the Bologna Process shows, we must make further efforts to consolidate and build on progress. We will strive for more coherence between our policies, especially in completing the transition to the three cycle system, the use of ECTS credits, the issuing of Diploma Supplements, the enhancement of quality assurance and the implementation of qualifications frameworks, including the definition and evaluation of learning outcomes.”

We have a restatement of the three cycle system. The first cycle with its minimum of three years and its link to the second cycle appears in a variety of guises and meets a variety of reactions from employers (educated largely with a long duration degree and having to adjust to the new first cycle) and admissions tutors (for example, in the USA to Masters programmes). As was stated in the Press Briefing<sup>7</sup>:

“There is no single model of either first or second cycle programmes in the EHEA: in the first cycle, most countries have a combination of 180 ECTS and 240 ECTS and/or another duration. In the second cycle, the most common model is 120 ECTS. The 180+120 ECTS credits (“3+2”) model is therefore the most widespread, but a number of other combinations can be found.”

This may cause some uncertainty or even confusion but it allows for flexibility within a framework that does spell out the level descriptors (student learning outcomes) required to achieve a particular qualification (or credential). Linked to this are the credits (once again defined through learning outcomes and student workload).

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<sup>7</sup> See - [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info), accessed 26/09/2012



The models for the cycles (first = baccalaureate and includes short cycle, being equivalent to an associate degree; second = masters; third = doctorate) indicate a clear climbing frame for mobility across and up through the qualifications as shown by the framework for qualifications in the EHEA (Bergen 2005) which:

“..... shows **what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on the basis of a given qualification** – that is, it shows the expected learning outcomes for a given qualification. It also shows how the various qualifications in the education or higher education system interact, that is **how learners can move between qualifications**. Qualifications frameworks therefore focus on outcomes more than on procedures, and several learning paths – including those of lifelong learning – may lead to a given qualification.”

[emphasis from the original]

To achieve a well educated population across the 47 countries structures, processes and outcomes must be defined. The role of higher education to help provide solutions to the need for economic growth is clear but so too is its place in the broader societal needs. The need for quality higher education for all is clearly spelt out in the Bucharest Communiqué – the need for widening access, student centred learning and robust quality assurance mechanisms. Recognition of the social dimension including:

“entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations” and the Bologna texts also emphasise the “importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background” (London Communiqué 2007, p. 5).

The need to increase participation to compete economically and to attract bright minds from across the globe dovetails with the social dimension aspirations. A revolving door for first generation (or 21<sup>st</sup> century) students must be avoided; there must be equity of access, recruitment, participation and completion. Achieving these aims will increase the economic and civic participation and contribution of the population.



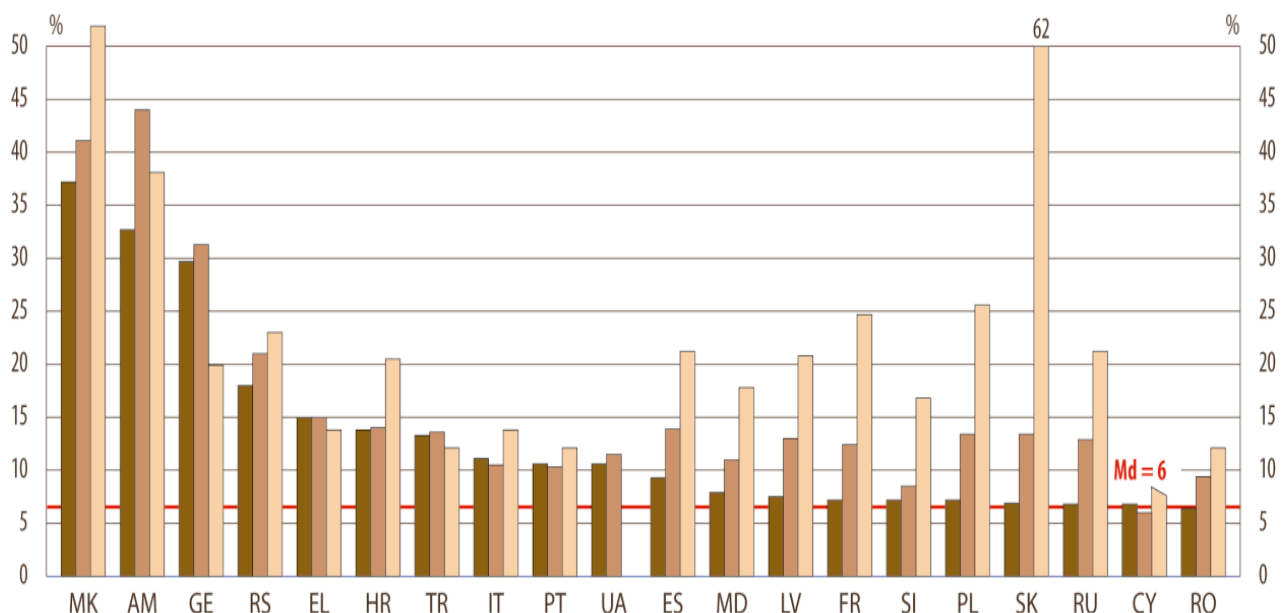
Lifelong learning (LLL) is also a crucial component to achieving these aims. Widening participation must include under-represented groups (thus reflecting the diversity of the populations) and these must be categorised in the broadest possible ways, thus including returning learners, mature entrant learners as well as the more traditional designations of the under-represented (often defined by race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation etc). However, LLL will only succeed if there is a well defined qualifications framework (looking at the European Qualifications Framework as a LLL framework as opposed to a narrower higher education framework), a credit system that embraces outputs, workload and different forms of learning (difficult if “seat time” is a major component).

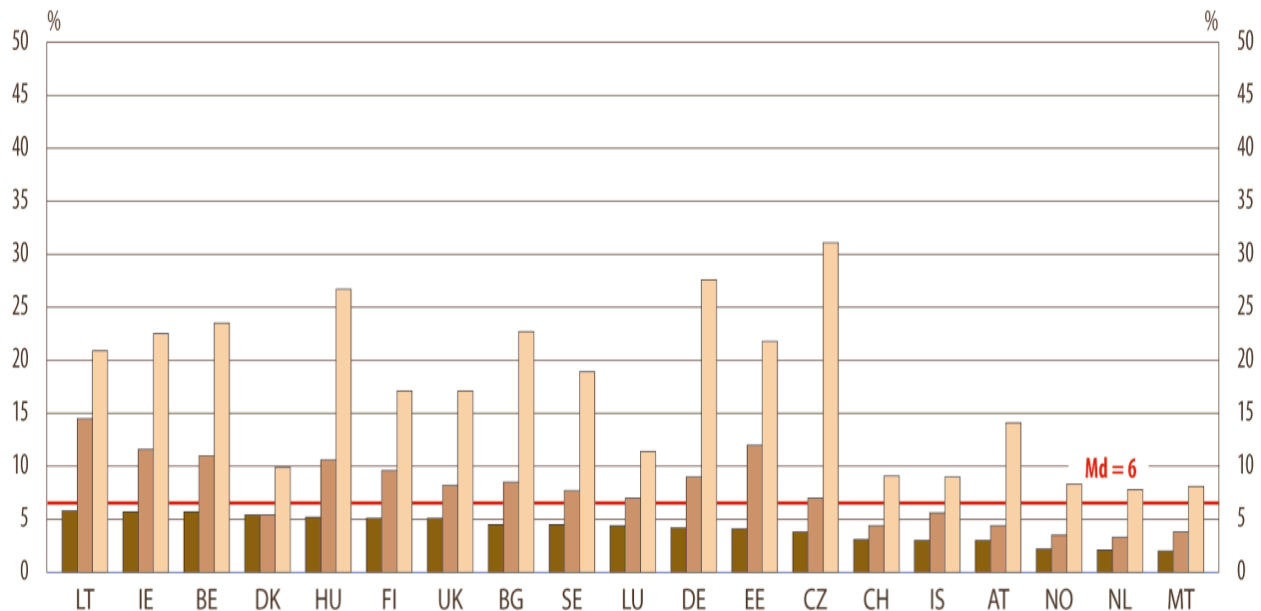
All of these elements are encompassed by the EHEA and Bologna Process and recognised in the Bucharest Communiqué.




### Changes

As the Communiqué states this is a time of consolidation and building on progress. The essential building blocks have been identified and are in place. Naturally, different states are making progress at different speeds – their starting points were different as were their traditions.

To make a complementary point to the OECD data the Press Release contains data on unemployment according to level of education (a point also made in the OECD and Georgetown data):





 High educational attainment  
 Medium educational attainment  
 Low educational attainment  
 Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (LFS).

The lower the educational attainment the worse the unemployment rate.

All of the elements identified are those referred to in the Communiqué as the focus for action over the next 3 years – widening participation, student centred learning, quality, lifelong learning, employability, the central position of learning outcomes in credits, frameworks and documenting progress through the use of the Diploma Supplement.

### The ping-pong effect

The debates about student learning, learning outcomes, credits, access, completion, employability, academic freedom, league tables, mission differentiation, research, tenure, use of hourly paid (adjunct) staff, lifelong learning, etc, all resonate across the globe. The United States is no exception to this. The diversity of the systems across the USA are well known, but so too is the

diversity across the globe and, once again, when comparing the EHEA and the USA the metrics are remarkably similar.

The EHEA, in the best traditions of higher education, has studied, analysed, borrowed and amended higher education components. This has included many of these familiar debating point aspects of higher education.

The challenges are global. The solutions may differ in detail but do appear to have many similarities.

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