

# Four years ELIA on the way to a European higher Education Area in the Arts

## Introduction

The intergovernmental Bologna Declaration (June 1999) with follow-up conferences of the European Ministers of Education in Prague (May 2001) and in Berlin (September 2003) had a tremendous impact on the art schools in Europe. Practically all arts institutions in Europe are engaged in a lengthy process of redeveloping curricula and programmes. Over the past four years *Bologna* became a key activity of ELIA and now, in moving to a *Post-Bologna* phase, new issues arise for consideration. This paper presents a brief reflection on the results of the *Bologna* thematic network and preview of these issues. Rather than seeking a European standardisation of higher arts education our objective has been about supporting and promoting diversity, gaining a better understanding of national, disciplinary, and pedagogical differences and creating an ongoing dialogue between institutions and national and European governmental and professional bodies.

## Bologna, a complex and shifting scene

From a political point of view the *Bologna* process is a complex issue needing continuous analysis. It is easily susceptible to wrong or inaccurate information, which sometimes raises unnecessary tensions. The debate within ELIA has developed from a fundamental criticism of the European higher education developments to a pragmatic, pro-active approach to seeking appropriate solutions and implementing them. This shift from the 'why' to the 'how' can be seen both in individual institutions and at the European level, even though fundamental concerns remain and should continue to be part of the European debate. A shift from institution-driven to market-driven education is not so evident in arts education, especially in countries with a strong public policy in education. Flemish expert Dirk van Damme makes the case for re-conceptualising higher education as a public good on an international level combined with a strong plea for strengthening institutional autonomy. The former Greek Bologna representative Dionyssis Kladis speaks about balancing competitiveness with improving the social characteristics of the European higher education area. Such balanced views appeal to many people involved in higher arts education.

In national settings there have been and still are plenty of opportunities to use *Bologna* as an argument for measures that, strictly speaking, are not part of the *Bologna* objectives. For many colleagues from the new EU countries *Bologna* becomes indistinguishable from measures introduced to be compliant with EU regulations. National ministries use *Bologna* as a pretext for introducing performance based targets, budgets and indicators leading to painful interventions with far reaching consequences, for instance on staffing levels and staff-student ratios. The *Bologna* objectives do not prescribe the duration of the two study cycles, nor the integration of polytechnics or Hochschulen into universities. The diverse implementation of the two-cycle system in arts institutions in the signatory countries leads one to conclude that they are far from being in tune.

## Educational transformations in arts institutions

Most institutions have been obliged to develop reorganisation plans and implement new statutes and regulations. A large number of art schools have taken *Bologna* as a positive opportunity to rethink aims, programmes and curricula or have found pragmatic ways to deal with the implications of the Bologna process. While discussing *Bologna* four

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interrelated key issues are frequently raised: the two-cycle bachelor' and masters' programmes; learning outcomes/ competencies, the implementation of ECTS and quality enhancement/assurance. In most countries, as a result of new national regulations, arts institutions have now implemented the two-cycle structure. A rough audit of the current position tells us that North and West Europe are the most advanced in their implementation, with the exception of France and Germany. In both considerable confusion still exists as to whether it is appropriate, and if so, how to embed the two-cycle system in the art schools. Spain and Portugal are making progress, as are most new EU countries – including the candidate countries Romania and Bulgaria. There is less progress in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and in Greece. Norway impresses with the quality of the implementation, according to reports of colleagues, although it had to be done pretty fast.

For arts schools in some countries ECTS seems an enormous hurdle to take. But credit points and learning outcomes play an important role in the comparability of levels of study programmes and standards of programmes, and many countries have already adopted credit systems compatible to, or easily convertible into ECTS. Credit points are - as John Perry (Chair of Prospero, ELIA Theatre Section) argues from a theatre point of view - like a *bureau de change*. In the arts mutual recognition of study periods is not considered a big problem as the students normally are assessed on the basis of personal course work or performances. There are hardly any obstacles to be found here. Awarding joint degrees and diploma recognition at the Bachelors' or Masters' level are more complex issues and it may be difficult to reach a common understanding<sup>(1)</sup>

### Does Bologna instrumentalise higher arts education?

In arts education we must acknowledge the diversity of approaches and traditions, codes and values, which constitute art practices. It is this diversity and complexity that provides important dynamics to the education process. A process that will often necessitate the re-analysis and reformulation of cultural, social, political and spiritual values. Modes of learning that lay stress on creativity, improvisation and the questioning of orthodoxy of whatever kind. "An artist does not exist thanks to a diploma, which only provides an administrative existence", argues Michel Métayer, Director of the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Toulouse and ELIA Board member, in his report about France. The milestone documents for Dance, Theatre and Fine Art education, all state that higher arts education is not simply about preparing students for the predefined requirements of a profession. Higher arts education is also about an active contribution to the development of their field and to making a broader contribution to the communities and societies students operate within. The fundamental question is whether the *Bologna* process in general, or through particular aspects of it such as ECTS, really threatens or limits core values. Does it necessarily lead to a standardisation of the educational experience instead of underpinning a rich range of learning and teaching practices – all aiming to achieve the same high academic standards? This is probably the most debated question in meetings around the implementation of the Bologna process in higher arts education. These sensitive issues call for detailed exercises carefully formulated for the arts discipline on how to find solutions to relate these seemingly intangible elements as well as specific ways of learning, teaching and assessment in the arts, such as studio practice, performing, independent working, performing, peer assessment etc. What we have found through reports and achievements of institutions within countries that have fully or partly implemented outcomes-based learning and ECTS (or an equivalent) give no indication that they effect the quality, standards or core values of higher education.

### Learning outcomes at the heart of the Bologna strategy

Dionysis Kladis, former Greek representative to the *Bologna follow-up group*, now a professor at Peleponese University argues that it is the *learning outcomes approach* rather than the *structural reforms towards the two-cycle system* that will lead to the desired substantial comparability and compatibility of higher education systems. The *learning outcomes approach* is the main instrument to realise a shift from *teacher-centred or teaching-oriented* approaches in the learning and teaching process to *student-centred or learning-oriented*. Using the learning outcomes approach to higher arts education in a European setting offers a great opportunity to look from the point of view of what we want students to achieve and place lesser emphasis on the position of the teacher. Learning outcomes are not meant to, and do not define the academic content, they define the skills and attributes the students should achieve if they meet the aims of the particular course/programme.

For several reasons it is important to distinguish between the function of 'learning outcomes' or 'competences' at different levels:

- ◆ **National level.** In several countries, largely inspired by the so-called *Dublin-descriptors* <sup>(2)</sup> developed by the Joint Quality Group, or by the *Tuning project*, a large-scale exercise started redefining generic and subject-specific competencies for different disciplines. This happened in Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, Norway (quality reform) and recently in Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia. The *Tuning project* mainly seems to have an impact in Spain. The UK already had introduced outcomes-based learning and carried out exercises '*benchmarking*' all higher education subjects.
- ◆ **Institutional level.** Under the influence of these developments and/or as the result of the introduction of the two-cycle system, departments and programmes have been involved in redefining objectives for their programmes and degrees, but not always using the learning outcomes approach or competency-based learning as a model.
- ◆ **European (peer) discipline-specific level.** The collective process, acknowledging what is specific and appropriate for a (arts) discipline, identifying a common understanding across Europe without any attempt to homogenise or to waive differences aside has been one of the most rewarding thematic network activities. Both the AEC in higher music education and ELIA in fine art, theatre and dance higher education, have undertaken such work. According to the experience of the working groups, this process constitutes an ongoing international dialogue among institutions broader than a set of fixed objectives. It also creates a body of knowledge and understanding of the range of different structures and potentially enhances transparency and possibilities for collaboration and recognition of programmes and degrees. ELIA and AEC have undertaken these activities in the context of the *Bologna thematic network in the arts*, developing their own methodology similar to the *Tuning Educational Structures* <sup>(3)</sup> project.



## Findings from the thematic network activities

### **Building on the strength of arts education**

The pro-active approach in the Bologna thematic network and the ELIA/AEC has turned out to be very productive, both in seeing the opportunities of the process and staying aware of problems and dilemmas. Neither ambivalence nor fear should inhibit us to come forward with our own agenda. We stopped using the phrase 'we must do this because the EU/the European ministers/the European Commission/the *Tuning project* ask us to do it'. A significant decision was to take the dynamics of learning and teaching in the arts as a distinctive starting point for developing a position on the implications of the *Bologna process in the arts*<sup>(4)</sup> (ELIA/AEC 2003 position paper). This paper set the tone for further meetings and documents and was taken further at the ELIA/AEC Vienna Dialogue on *Bologna in the arts* (April 2003) and the arts education contribution at the *European University Association* Convention in Graz, Austria (May 2004).

### **Focus on self-evaluation rather than on formal procedures**

Ever since a first working meeting in Prague in May 2002 was organised ELIA started to work in the field of quality enhancement, self-evaluation through discussion papers, training in self-evaluation with the intention to set up peer visits to support individual institutions. In the next thematic network, *interjartes*, this will be a key issue.

### **Defining learning outcomes can only be done by people directly involved in teaching**

It has been the consensus of participants of the dissemination meetings and working groups that defining learning outcomes is fruitful, learning outcomes can be shared in spite of differences in programmes, and approaches. Working with learning outcomes helps students to have a better understanding of their own learning process, and helps staff to think through the way they teach and assess students and define levels of achievement. It does not define content, phases, subjects and pedagogical methods. For the many working group members involved in researching and developing these learning outcomes it was/is an extremely rewarding process of rethinking curricula and programmes, especially when it coincided with similar activities at school and/or national level. All points previously mentioned underline that such a process can only be carried out by people directly involved in teaching the subject.

### **Support needed for art schools in Southeast Europe**

The overwhelming impression from the joint AEC/ELIA conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, which brought together art schools/universities from Southeast Europe, was the need for information and support from arts institutions in other parts of Europe. Colleagues from that region realised they still have a long way to go on the way to a European higher education area in the arts. In addition, colleagues mentioned striking examples of the lack of resources. Some schools have made the step to 'modernise' their programmes and structures. Other institutions tend to underline their pedagogical qualities and cultural traditions, which they rightfully wish to maintain and which they want to flourish. Finding a balance between maintaining this invaluable contribution to Europe's cultural heritage and modernisation seems to be a delicate, nearly impossible challenge.

## Issues for further consideration

In the coming years the higher arts education sector will have to define and redefine the parameters for the international dimension in higher arts education. The results summarised in the milestone documents constitute a crucial step forward but are still predominantly descriptive. For maximum transparency and for meaningful and reliable quality assessment and enhancement, the emphasis needs to shift towards the analytic<sup>(5)</sup>. Even for the descriptive work to progress, there needs to be commonly accepted

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language and categories, and there are indications that, for example, the resistance to the notion of learning outcomes and ECTS is being overcome in the arts. It is this kind of synergy which can be achieved by organisations such as ELIA, AEC and other discipline-networks but such a move cannot be done without the willingness within the sector as a whole to invest in such an endeavour.

The following will form the outline of the future agenda for the next stage of discussions and activities:

- ◆ To develop common reference points for quality in an international and flexible framework.
- ◆ To develop a clearer understanding of what is meant by transparency (a common language and terminology, mutual recognition issues, generic learning outcomes, possibly ECTS)?
- ◆ To establish a - voluntary – European Quality Assurance advisory body, with a register of experts from the different arts disciplines?

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All documents can be found at [www.bologna.elia-artschools.org](http://www.bologna.elia-artschools.org).

- (1) Recent ELIA research 'Bringing international Mobility in the Arts to the forefront' revealed that for art students this quite often results in two different degree studies at the same level, done in different countries. This issue should be addressed.
- (2) Joint Quality Initiative [www.jointquality.org](http://www.jointquality.org)
- (3) [www.relint.deusto.es/TuningProject/index.htm](http://www.relint.deusto.es/TuningProject/index.htm)
- (4) ELIA/AEC position paper (in English, French and German). Downloadable from [www.elia-artschools.org](http://www.elia-artschools.org)
- (5) Evaluation report 2003 Bologna thematic network, by external evaluator Jerry Booth.