

Bolognese sauce

A birthplace of higher education tries to become its future too.

When European education ministers met in Bologna in 1999 and promised within a decade to forge a common market for universities, it seemed mere Euro-rhetoric. Big obstacles stopped students nipping abroad for a term, or getting degrees recognised. Many countries offered no degree below Masters level. Some examined course modules separately, others all in one go. Under the Erasmus programme many students travelled to other European countries for between a term and a year—but they often found their universities reluctant to give them credit for it.

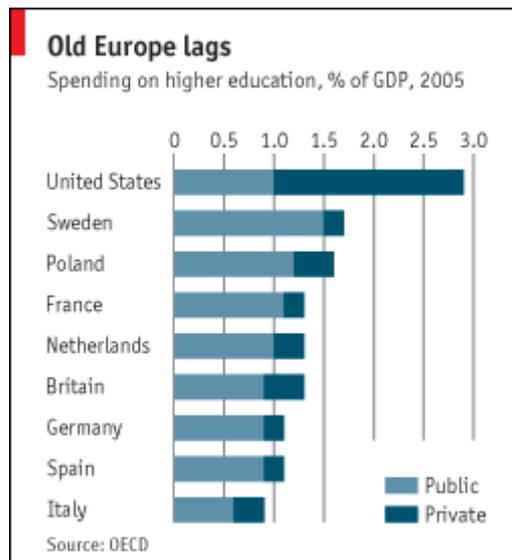
Yet on April 28th no fewer than 46 European education ministers—from the European Union and 19 other countries, including Russia and Turkey—will gather in another ancient university city, Leuven, to declare the “Bologna process” a triumph. A “European credit-transfer system” is on its way; next year will bring a “European higher education area”. There will be a standardised “diploma supplement” giving details of what students have learnt. And three-year Bachelors degrees followed by two-year Masters are now the general rule, with few exceptions.

“The big surprise was that the Bologna process worked at all,” says Jean-Marc Rapp, president of the European University Association. Bologna is neither an inter-governmental treaty nor an EU law. He credits the eastern European countries that joined Bologna in 1999 for some of the success. Their governments were itching to reform communist-era universities and delighted to have a template for it—and their students were wild to travel.

Another reason why some governments embraced Bologna was to give cover for reforms they wanted anyway. Shorter, more work-related degrees appealed to the Germans, keen to stop students hanging on for years at taxpayers’ expense. In France, changes to university financing have been called “Bologna”. In Spain “Bologna” is the excuse for introducing fees for Masters degrees.

Many students now anathematise “Bologna” as a capitalist plot. They plan protests in Leuven; already, students have taken to the streets in France, Italy, Spain and Greece. The resemblance to the Anglo-American system, plus Bologna’s emphasis on graduate employability, are big grievances. Some academics fret that the secret aim is to privatise universities. Bologna’s endorsement of more autonomy could lead (horrors!) to more freedom for universities in hiring, promotion and pay.

Europe is littered with historic universities (Bologna is the oldest, founded in 1088). But the paucity of European institutions and the ubiquity of American ones at the top of international league tables are a constant reminder of the gap between glorious past and mediocre present. For believers, Bologna shows the way to a future that will be glorious once more.



Yet this vision of self-governing universities, footloose students and job-ready graduates omits one big reason for European universities' decline: money. In America, the gap between what governments pay and what universities need is made up privately, mainly by tuition fees. In most of Europe students pay nothing. Even in England, tuition fees are capped by the government at low levels.

Europe's universities have seen funding per student fall behind wage inflation by 1-2% a year over three decades. America devotes far more of its GDP to higher education (see chart). Bruegel, a Brussels-based think-tank, finds that universities carrying out top-class research and leading league tables have both more autonomy and more money. If Europe delivers only one of these, it may not be enough.

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