

## **Exploring Difference: Bachelor's / Master's Transitions 20 Years after Bologna**

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### **Executive Summary**

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Nearly two decades ago, Germany became a full member of the Bologna Process, thereby committing to overhaul the system of credit-less, module-less degrees and shift to a system that would attempt to standardize higher education qualifications across Europe.

The move would not only inch Germany closer to a university system with which countries like the United States and Canada are familiar, but it would spell the end of all Magister and most Diplom programs, establishing streamlined standards across many European countries but also igniting impassioned debates about the purpose of academia.

Now, 20 years later, it's time to evaluate: has the Bologna Process worked for Germany? Have the last two decades stripped away students' freedom or has it provided much needed structure to a system that once lacked it? Has the loss been greater than the gain, or is the opposite true? Or does the answer lie somewhere in the middle?

These questions were at the heart of the 15th annual ID-E conference, "Exploring Difference: Bachelor's / Master's Transitions 20 Years after Bologna," held at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin on November 27, 2018. The conference, which featured panelists from the United States, Canada, Poland, and the United Kingdom, drew attendees from academic institutions all over Germany in addition to diplomats, current Fulbright and DAAD grantees, and representatives from ministries.

### **National Backgrounds: Germany and Poland**

Prior to Germany's adoption of the Bologna Process, there was no two-tier system in the country, nor standardized degrees across Europe. The academic landscape included Diplom programs for natural sciences, engineering, and business, Magister programs for arts, languages, and humanities, and State Examinations (which continue to be used in fields like medicine, law, and education today).

Students seeking Diplom and Magister degrees could study for as long as it took them to complete their degree before taking an all-encompassing exam at the end. There were no credits nor modules which meant students had an extraordinary amount of freedom to "shop around" for classes without worrying it could be damaging to their academic record if it wasn't a good fit. The flip side of this was that students had the potential to get a little lost.

Today Germany has a two-tier system, with students studying six semesters (three years) for Bachelor's degrees and four semesters (two years) for Master's. Oftentimes, Bachelor's and Master's programs belong together like "Siamese twins." For example, a student who has not completed a particular Bachelor's preceding a particular Master's program at a university may find he or she is not admitted to that Master's program. This is just one reason it's incredibly

common for a student to stay on at the same university, without a break between degrees or change in location.

Furthermore, there's frequently the notion in Germany that holding *only* a Bachelor's degree is not sufficient to enter the German labor market and that attaining a Master's is a necessary next step.

Similarly in Poland directly after Bologna, noted panelist Ewa Chmielecka, a Professor at the Warsaw School of Economics, the labor market didn't recognize a Bachelor's: employers wanted a Master's. But step by step and year by year, she said, this is changing. Although there's no fear that the Master's degree will "vanish," and there will always be fields that require one, she said the importance of a Master's is decreasing, while the importance of a Bachelor's degree is increasing.

### **National Backgrounds: The United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom**

In the United States, said panelist R. Lynn Sydnor-Epps from the University of Delaware, universities are committed not only to the academic growth of a student but to the growth of a student as a whole. Therefore, there's a huge amount of services and time devoted to aspects of university like "campus life" and a student's individual connection to his or her surrounding community.

Most Bachelor's programs are four years, with the first two years filled more with general education requirements and the second two focusing on a student's individual major. It's not nearly as common for a student to go directly from Bachelor's to Master's degrees as it is in Germany. Sydnor-Epps said in fact for some Master's programs, work and "real life" experience can be a requirement for admission. As the Senior Associate Director for Employer and Alumni Engagement, one of Sydnor-Epps's main tasks is outreach to potential employers and preparing students for the marketplace.

Similarly, "student experience" has become a catch phrase in Canada, said Creso Sá, the Director of the Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education at the University of Toronto. Sá noted that the system in Canada operates very similarly to the system in the United States, although there is much regional variety between the different provinces.

Like Germany, the United Kingdom has been committed to the Bologna Process since 1999. Universities in the U.K. are self-governing and are highly autonomous, retaining individual control of finance and quality. Colin Grant, Vice-Principal International at Queen Mary University of London, touched on how there's long been a distinction between the Bachelor's and Master's, so the metaphor of the programs acting like "Siamese twins" in Germany does not resonate in the United Kingdom. One seismic shift in the current model, Grant noted however, will be Brexit. It's clear that it will cause a massive disruption, but no one is yet certain how it will play out.

### **What's the Purpose of Academia?**

The question at the heart of this debate is the role of academic institutions. It's "Bildung" (Education) versus "Ausbildung" (Training): learning for the sake of learning versus learning for the sake of career-readiness. Should universities be training students as scholars or to be employees?

On the one hand, there's the old guard. The people who believe in "Humboldt's Ideal" and the idea that university is for free thinking, it's for academics, and it might not be for everybody. Many in this camp criticize the Bologna Process for its role in turning universities into "schools" or for selling the idea of university to the market place. There's too little education and too much structure, they say.

Bologna proponents might counter that rigidity is not a fault of Bologna itself; rather it's a factor of how it's been implemented. In theory, they might argue, the two-tier degree system of the Bologna Process offers students tremendous freedom. Students can change both subjects and locations between attaining their Bachelor's and Master's degrees because there are now shared standards across much of Europe.

### **"The Ivory Tower" vs. Accessibility**

One interesting moment in the discussion was an examination of the phrase, "ivory tower," and whether it is either necessary or outdated and if it has positive or negative connotations for academia.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition of "ivory tower" is "a secluded place that affords the means of treating practical issues with an impractical often escapist attitude...especially, a place of learning."

Grant said the idea of "ivory tower" had more or less faded from public discourse in the U.K., and that was a good thing. He believed the term had not served universities well.

But the flip side of the ivory tower, noted Chmielecka, is the idea that there's insulation from external pressures and that universities maintain independence.

Still, Sá argued that "academic rigor" is not an excuse for maintaining an "ivory tower," and that no credible university would make its case for being one. In fact, many universities these days in Canada and the United States make it clear that they want to prioritize diversity and inclusivity (which, Sydnor-Epps, noted, many businesses are aiming to do too).

### **Conclusions**

One of the main goals of the ID-E Berlin International Dialogue on Education is to learn from good practices in partner countries and ask questions. What can Germany learn from other countries and what can other countries learn from Germany and one another?

A few members of the audience contributed their reflections from the conference. One person said that the "Humboldt Ideal" should be continually upheld and that it is imperative to have

more than three years of education before attaining a job. In other words, she noted, she doesn't think Germany should follow the United States.

Another person noted his surprise at the similarities between Poland and Germany, and that though it's often the case that Germany learns from and follows countries like the U.S. and the U.K., maybe it was time for the country to look more closely at Central Europe.

Throughout the session, Grant drew comparisons between universities in the U.K. and partner countries. He said perhaps they could learn from the way universities in the U.S. cultivate a cohort experience to encourage more students to study abroad and also how they harness their alumni network. In regards to Germany post-Bologna, he said German education both before and after 1999 has been excellent. And though it is unclear the impact Brexit will have on higher education across Europe, he concluded that we are still speaking the same language.

### **Panelists of the 15th ID-E Berlin Conference:**

- **Colin Grant**, Vice-Principal International, Queen Mary University of London (UK)
- **Creso Sá**, Director of the Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education (CIHE), University of Toronto (CA)
- **Ewa Chmielecka**, Professor, Warsaw School of Economics (PL)
- **R. Lynn Sydnor-Epps**, Senior Associate Director, Employer and Alumni Engagement, Career Center, University of Delaware (US)
- Chair: **Jan-Martin Wiarda**, Science and Education Journalist

### **About ID-E Berlin:**

The series INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE ON EDUCATION BERLIN (ID-E Berlin) is a joint initiative of the British Council, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the German-American Fulbright Commission, the Embassy of Canada in Germany and Freie Universität Berlin.