

# Bologna as a frame for Competence Based Learning and Supervision?

## 1. Introduction

This article addresses the question whether the Bologna Declaration provides a frame for organising supervision in Social Work Education. Is supervising social work students an educational activity that fits into the Bologna process? How does the Bologna process affect supervision?

I first discuss shortly the Bologna process and its effects on Higher Education in Europe. The shift from defining Aims and objectives into Learning Outcomes illustrates predominately the main changes.

Secondly I shortly outline the key elements of supervision as a compulsory and powerful instrument to train social work students and to equip them with the key competencies for the job.

In the third part I focus on actual changes in understanding learning, in the learning concepts and in the learning context. Consequently modularisation of the education is to create a learning environment which provides challenges and opportunities for real learning.

The last part tackles the complicated issue of competencies. How to formulate competencies and how to assess them are the main questions underlining the actual discussion. A competence based curriculum is a turning point in organising social work education, which takes the risk for the future development of the profession and the lifelong learning of the student.

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## 2. The Bologna Declaration

### 2.1. Overview

The Bologna Declaration was accepted in 1999 as an agreement between 29 European countries and as a pledge to reform the structures of their higher education systems in a convergent way. It is a binding commitment, freely taken by each signatory country to an action program searching for common European answers for common European problems. “The process originates from the recognition that in spite of their valuable differences, European higher education systems are facing common internal and external challenges related to the growth and diversification of higher education, the employability of graduates, the shortage of skills in key areas, the expansion of private and transnational education, etc. The Declaration recognises the value of coordinated reforms, compatible systems and common action.”<sup>1</sup>

It fits to the EU strategy to become “the most competitive knowledge based society in the world”... “capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to face the challenges of the new millennium”

“The **action programme** set out in the Declaration is based on a clearly defined common goal, a deadline and a set of specified objectives:

- a clearly defined common goal: to create a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education;
- a deadline: the European space for higher education should be completed in 2010;
- a set of specified objectives:
  - the adoption of a **common framework of readable and comparable degrees**, “also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement”;
  - the introduction of **undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries**, with first degrees no shorter than 3 years and relevant to the labour market;
  - **ECTS-compatible credit systems** also covering lifelong learning activities;
  - a **European dimension in quality assurance**, with comparable criteria and methods;
  - the **elimination of remaining obstacles to the free mobility** of students (as well as trainees and graduates) and teachers (as well as researchers and higher education administrators).”

The Bologna Action Lines are as follows

1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system;
2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries;
3. Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system - as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf>, 7-8-2007, p 3

- non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognised by the receiving universities concerned;
4. Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement with particular attention to:
    - for students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services;
    - for teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and validation of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, without prejudicing their statutory rights;
  5. Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies;
  6. Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research;”<sup>2</sup>
  7. “Lifelong learning (LLL) – Prague Communiqué (2001)  
Lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life.
  8. Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)  
Ministers agreed on the importance of enhancing attractiveness of European higher education to students from Europe and other parts of the world. The readability and comparability of European higher education degrees world-wide should be enhanced by the development of a common framework of qualifications, as well as by coherent quality assurance and accreditation/certification mechanisms and by increased information efforts.”<sup>3</sup>
  9. “European Higher Education Area and European Research Area – two pillars of the knowledge based society“ Degrees should have different defined outcomes”  
Berlin Communiqué (2003)  
Conscious of the need to promote closer links between the EHEA and the ERA in a Europe of Knowledge, and of the importance of research as an integral part of higher education across Europe, Ministers consider it necessary to go beyond the present focus on two main cycles of higher education to include the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. They emphasise the importance of research and research training and the promotion of interdisciplinarity in maintaining and improving the quality of higher education and in enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education more generally. Ministers call for increased mobility at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels and encourage the institutions concerned to increase their cooperation in doctoral studies and the training of young researchers.  
Ministers will make the necessary effort to make European Higher Education Institutions an even more attractive and efficient partner. Therefore Ministers ask Higher Education Institutions to increase the role and relevance of research to technological, social and cultural evolution and to the needs of society.  
Ministers understand that there are obstacles inhibiting the achievement of these goals and these cannot be resolved by Higher Education Institutions alone. It requires strong support, including financial, and appropriate decisions from national Governments and European Bodies.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf> 7-8-2007, p 4

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bologna.msmt.cz/PragueSummit/Fcommuniqué.html> 7-8-2007, p

Finally, Ministers state that networks at doctoral level should be given support to stimulate the development of excellence and to become one of the hallmarks of the European Higher Education Area.”<sup>4</sup>

“The key to success of the Bologna cooperation is the underlying partnership approach, in both policy-making and implementation. Today, the Process unites [46 countries](#), all party to the [European Cultural Convention](#), that cooperate in a flexible way, involving also [international organisations](#) and [European associations](#) representing higher education institutions, students, staff and employers.”<sup>5</sup>

## 2.2. Effects on European Higher Education

### 2.2.1. Major changes in Higher Education

Since the implementation of the Bologna standards a lot has changed in European Higher Education.

To sum up:

1. A European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) has been introduced and is today in use in most European Universities. One credit stands for 30 hours student study load, including contact hours, preparation, assignments and assessment. A credit also should reflect the expected learning outcomes of a student and is in that prospective of value for lifelong learning.

2. European Higher Education has minimum 2 levels: Bachelor (Ba) with between 180 – 240 credits and Master (Ma) 60 – 120 credits.

Ba has to give direct access to the labor market and employment, whereas Ma should be a specialization. Doctoral studies (PhD) have been introduced as a third level.

3. Competences & learning outcomes are the basic parameters in order to be able to compare higher education between different universities and different countries. They are as a reference for transparency, benchmarks for quality assurance & accreditation, and for employability as a tool for better communication with the stakeholders in the field

4. Instruments for improving the quality of higher education as generic and subject-specific competencies are installed and directives for curriculum development, quality assurance and accreditation are set up.

5. One of the changes with the most impact on the educational process is the shift from a teacher perspective into a student prospective. By defining learning as a student activity which has to be facilitated by the teacher and by measuring the learning effects in terms of students' learning outcomes a totally different learning process has to be set up.

If the education is defined by aims and objectives, the emphasis is on the input. What the teacher intends to cover is the most important, the subject is central. Social Work is the mainly taught through disciplines underpinning social work.

If the education is defined by students' learning outcomes, the output is central and a different perspective is introduced, student centered. Challenging questions are how to measure students' learning and how to set up a system which facilitates students' learning.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf> 7-8-2007, p 7

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/about> 7-8-2007

## 2.2.2. Conclusions: Some critical notes and considerations for SW Education (1)

The impacts<sup>(6)</sup> on social work education are multifaceted. Research has pointed out that an increase of the academic focus has taken place in most Social Work Departments. In universities where before Bologna social work was taught as profession, education was mainly focused on preparing students for the SW field. Training for practice got the main attention. By transforming professional education into bachelor and providing transitional arrangement to a master level, two tendencies become turned up. On the one hand academisation in order to prepare more students for a master and on the other hand limitation of practice training. Most educational programmes had to reduce the study period for a bachelor. They cut in the practice part of the education.

Academisation took place by giving more relevance on scientific theories and by integrating research and the result of applied research in the teaching. In general one can discover a convergence on the contents of SW programs. SW Ba became a more generalist education and in the mean time the development and specialization of Ma & PhD in SW took place in many EU-countries.

With the focus on employability the education became more in line with lifelong learning.

Another effect was the focus on European and international issues. This was not only the case for social work education, but the effects of the globalization on social work issues became more and more visible in post-modern society.

As a result of stimulating and rewarding the European dimension there was an increase of student and teacher exchange in higher education and in SW education as well. As a consequence of the mobility the demand for development of international modules was growing and in the wake of this opening up tendency the internationalizing of the SW curricula was the expected next step.

In the mean time the need for international/European quality assurance becomes pressing. In 2001 the European Ministers of Education meeting in Prague invited ENQA to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference for quality assurance, which would directly work towards the establishment of the European quality assurance framework by 2010. And of course also the need for international/European accreditation is growing. So far accreditation is still the responsibility of the individual countries and in most countries accreditation is done by the university or by the national minister of education. Independent accreditation organizations, staffed with representatives of the academic world, the employers, the employees and the labor unions on a European level is the next step. So far only between Flanders and the Netherlands the NVAO (Nederlands Vlaamse accreditatie organisatie) was set up. "The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) independently ensures the quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders by assessing and accrediting programmes, and contributes to furthering this quality."<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion:

Bologna is to compare with a worm virus; it intrudes the whole system and effects slowly all operations of higher education in Europe. The key question is how much the quality of the education is affected. In the next part we focus on supervision, where we will critically review

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<sup>6</sup> C.f. Christine Labonté-Roset, T(2005), he European higher education area and research-orientated social work education. In: European Journal of Social Work Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2005, pp.285-296

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nvao.net/about-nvao> 8-08-2007

the Bolonga process from the perspective of how students can be made familiar with the core of social work business. The concepts of “competencies” and “modules” are very relevant for discussing the place of supervision in social work education. We will come back on both concepts under 3. Changes in the learning concepts and under 4. Competence based learning.

### **3. Supervision in Social Work**

In the context the subject we are developing we understand in general by supervision **an educational process** in which a person with a certain equipment of knowledge and skills takes responsibility for training a person with less equipment “ (Supervision in social casework, 1936)

#### **3.1. Core business of SW education**

We focus here on supervision as an integral part of SW education. SW education should contain minimum the following parts: Theoretical knowledge and insights, methodological training, field practice training and supervision. Students learn the SW job by being coached on the spot, in practice. by an experienced SW professional. But this is in most cases not enough. Students on practice placement encounter a social work approach which fits to the type and the context of one particular SW environment.

The integration between theory, methodology and practice is the first issue in supervision. Reflection on the SW tasks, on the professional way to perform them and on the skills and attitudes involved is another one. In this perspective supervision is the core business of SW education as more explicitly explained in the definition of ANSE

“Supervision represents a specific method of training and enhancement of competence for human-oriented professions and functions in which methodical acting in interactions between persons forms an important aspect of exercising the profession.

The central task of supervision consists in learning to reflect independently on the own way of realizing the professional tasks in concrete situations. Supervision as such is spanning different methodical approaches and professional fields. Its characteristic features and conditions are theoretically expressed.” (Dutch concept, LVSB/ANSE, 2002).

#### **3.2. Stimulates reflection**

As already mentioned in the definition above independent reflection is the main outcome of supervision. Reflection means ‘thinking after’ as well as ‘thinking before’, pro-active thinking. Reflection is not only thinking it is also understanding and becoming conscious. It involves knowledge, attitude and skills.

#### **3.3. Focus on the personality in relation with the profession**

Good supervision contributes to the development of the personality. The confrontation with the SW reality effects in many ways the personality of the student. Supervision should provide space for expressing and discussing. The methodologies used in supervision will help to express and to understand the reality and the way of dealing with it. Discovering and being confronted with a different perspective towards the same reality is helping to understand processes of coping, resisting and overcoming thresholds of people.

### 3.4. Never prescribes, ever questions

Ethics respect and being aware of the ethical code is very important in all kind of human-oriented professions. The way to deal with it is not by imposing or ruling the code, but by asking the right questions and helping students to raise their questions, their concerns, their worries and their needs. Supervision is giving space and air for respiration.

### 3.5. Integral learning

Supervision is an educational process, it is about learning. Real learning takes students through a cycle which can be fixed with four learning styles: learning by doing, learning by observation, learning by studying and learning by instructing (Kolb)

Every individual has one or two preferred learning styles, which means that learning for this person is automatically done following this style(s). The missing styles need more effort to be activated. Supervision should contribute to become aware of student's spontaneous learning style(s) and should invite the student to activate the missing ones.

#### Conclusion:

Supervision is such a key element in education, aiming at developing the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to the profession. It contributes to stimulate students to developing their competencies. The Bologna process creates space for discussing the educational process of supervision.

In order to better understand the competence concept we first should look at the changing learning concepts and learning context. In part 4 we will come back to competencies.

## 4. A changed learning concept

In the traditional concept learning was mainly defined by 3 components: the teacher, the student and the content. This was roughly called the didactical triangle. In a more refined approach the learning process was explained as a puzzle with the following crosswords, fitting to each other: students' characteristics, students' background, students' abilities, the aims and objectives of the course, the classroom context, the transfer of knowledge, the assessment of the product and the practised skills.

The description of such a learning process was very much fitting to philosophy of which learning was about transfer knowledge.

Today we know that this kind of studying is only a very little part of real learning.

The triangle has been updated: the teacher becomes a facilitator or coach, the student becomes a learner and the contents are replaced by competencies. Students' abilities are completed with acquired competencies. Objectives are replaced by educational and professional competencies. The classroom context is completed with the field context. Transferring knowledge is extended with a wide range of methods. Product assessment needs to take in account the process assessment and next to practising skills also attitudes need to be developed.

Setting up such a more complicated didactical process is mainly done a different context in which subjects became modules. A module contains a cluster of subjects which bring learning to a richer activity as the sum of studying the different subjects. It integrates the subjects during the learning and does not only leave the integration as a task of the student.

Examples<sup>8</sup> of modules in social work education are:

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<sup>8</sup> The examples come from the curriculum of Bachelor in Social Work of Kempen University College in Geel, Belgium

Person-oriented module, integrating psychology, philosophy, biology and medical sciences.  
Society-oriented module integrates sociology, history, economy and statistics.  
Law module integrates legislation, social security regulations and policy  
Worker-oriented module focus on methodologies  
Practice module contains field practice and supervision.

A module should facilitate the development of students' competencies, it is outcome based and the assessment, replacing exams, is about the reached competencies.

### **Conclusion:**

The modern didactical concept and the modularization of the education provides a excellent environment for preparing students to profit as much as possible from supervision. The risk is that supervision will be replaced by the coaching activities during the modules, which will take away the free space of reflection on real performed social work. The danger is not to put supervision explicitly in the curriculum.

## **5. Competencies**

### **5.1. What's in a word?**

The word competence in the educational context is rather new, it looks like a new fashion. To be competent means to be good at something; it refers to a professional ability.

“Being someone competent” means that he/she “disposes of the ability to select within a specific context from a range of available actions and handles in order to reach a certain aim”

The Longman Language activator says “Someone who is competent has enough skills and knowledge to be able to do something to a high or satisfactory standard”

In literature the following elements are coming back:

- Gestalt' – ‘Cluster’
- Knowledge and insight, skills and attitude ‘close interlinked’, sometimes clearly mentioned and distinguished, sometimes implicit necessary in order to realise the competence
- Gestalt principle: the total is more than the sum of the parts
- Savoir – savoir faire – être
- Element of ‘performance’, availability, translation into ‘handling’, in the rich sense of the word (conscious, well-considered, well-founded, controlled – in contrast with the notion ‘behaviour’)
- Always formulated referring to some “relevant” and “critical” professional situations

A possible definition could be:

“A competence is a whole of knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes which a professional is setting in when critically intelligent ripe handling in different professional situations”

## 5.2. An example

Let us take an example to make it more concrete. An important competence of a social worker should be: **“The social worker can act socially and use his general knowledge of social sciences as well as his insights in practical cases.”**<sup>9</sup>

The following characteristics can be recognized:

A social worker who is able to demonstrate this competence on a sufficient level has integrated **knowledge, skills and attitude**. The word “socially” could be understood as an attitude, but the relation to the use of knowledge and practical insights reveals the two other elements.

On the one hand one can see that this competence refers to something which is never perfect and on the other hand it is clear that such a competence is only relevant in the perspective of **lifelong learning**. The competence demands a continuous ongoing process.

The competence clearly relate to the perspective for **professionalization**.

The competence implies an **ethical discourse**. Acting socially evokes all kind of situations with clients which implicates many ethical questions such as “How to behave socially if a client frauds or intimidates?”

Many supervision discussions deal with ethical questions. It is very important as a supervisor not reduce supervision questions to ethical dilemmas. Good supervision opens multifaceted perspectives.

## 6. Pitfalls and risks

Formulating competencies for social workers is not an easy act, which demands a deep insight in the core elements of the profession. A curriculum built on competencies is one of the cornerstones for educating learning professionals. A first pitfall is to reduce competencies too much to skills (can), without really taking into account the attitude and/or the motivation (e.g. giving meaning, wanting, spontaneously acting) This limitation occurs by focusing knowledge only in function of to can. A second pitfall has to do with the interpretation of knowledge. In some competencies the understanding is rather insights (has insight in..., understands...), which is too narrow for defining a competence.

Related to the modularization process there are also some difficulties which can become a pitfall. If a module is not broadly enough conceptualised it can be reduced to a subject to be taught or to a mixture of some related subjects. The essence of a module is the integration of different disciplines in relation to research, methodology and practice. P. ROBERT-JAN SIMONS & MANON C.P. RUIJTERS<sup>10</sup> have developed an integrated learning model in their article about finding the key elements for competence based of a learning professional. They state that “for a learning professional three main activities should be performed: to be working in practice, to be connected with or carrying out research, and to be teaching others

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<sup>9</sup> This competence is one of the 9 competencies formulated for the bachelor social work education of Kempen University College in Geel, Belgium. The overview of the nine competencies will be provided as an attachment to this article.

<sup>10</sup> P. ROBERT-JAN SIMONS & MANON C.P. RUIJTERS, 2006, LEARNING PROFESSIONALS: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED MODEL

## 7. Conclusions

The Bologna process can create space for a deeper formulating of the core of social work. The education built on the Bologna requirements (modules and competences) opens the perspectives of authentic, autonomous and collaborative learning. In such a learning process the learner follows the own rhythm and makes progress using all kind of tools adapted to the own learning style. Supervision in social work is an intensive dialogue between dedicated professionals about becoming more competent. It leads to sound professionals. It is therefore very much in line with the Bologna objectives.

Learning social work always requires any supervision during the education. The question if supervision needs to be an independent module is hard to answer. This is very much related to the whole curriculum. The advantage of an independent module is the presentation of a clear and for outsiders formal choice. The disadvantage could be to be cut off from other modules. The form<sup>(11)</sup> in which supervision is delivered, requires an extra discussion, which is far beyond this article, but group supervision seems to me the most inline with the Bologna objectives. It emphasised cooperation, collaborative learning based on an own contribution.

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<sup>11</sup> There are mainly 3 forms in use: 1. Individual supervision on the spot delivered by the field supervisor, 2. Individual or group supervision organised by the university in close connection with field placement, 3. independent supervision individual or in group delivered by a supervisor with a supervision licence.