

Bologna consulting as equals

TEXT: MELANIE RÜBARTSCH

As part of the Bologna Hub Peer Support project, universities from all over Europe were able to apply for a consultation with one or two Bologna experts. The project's aim is to work together to identify challenges and potential improvements in implementing the transnational higher education reform and to derive specific measures for the universities. The first digital meetings have now been held.

Studying and researching without borders, opening your mind not only to your own field of study, but also to other cultures, learning methods and languages – these are the primary goals of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The aim is for students to be able to collect comparable credits in different European countries without difficulty, to obtain recognized degrees anywhere and to rely on similar quality standards. However, individual universities continue to make varying degrees of progress in implementing these so-called key commitments of the Bologna Process. The project has now made it possible to get very direct and individual assistance. [Universities from all 49 countries participating in the EHEA were able to apply until March for a peer-to-peer consultation with up to two Bologna experts.](#)

High demand

The project is divided into multiple phases. “During an initial online meeting, the respective experts work together with university representatives to identify the university's individual challenges and to develop possible solutions together,” explained Matthias Becker, DAAD policy support officer for Erasmus+. DAAD is responsible for the operational implementation of the project and brought the universities together with the consultants. After six to twelve months, the experts meet again with the university representatives and evaluate what has been achieved. “A total of 86 universities applied for the 25 places initially planned for,” Becker said. Capacity was therefore quickly increased to 30 places.



Experts speak from their own experience

Some of the [27 Bologna experts](#) from 16 countries have already completed the first meetings between March and May –online because of the pandemic. This was how Irine Darchia, professor of Byzantine and neo-Greek studies at the University of Tbilisi, and Klaus Kratzer, professor of computer science at the University of Ulm, met in March with representatives of the private university Universidad Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid. The people in charge in Spain wanted to learn how the university could become more international. How could it become more attractive to foreign students while also increasing the mobility of its own students? “We first arranged a preliminary meeting with the prorector to establish a personal bond,” Klaus Kratzer said. “Then we spent a day getting into the specific content with a larger group of 15 representatives from various faculties.” Topics included the idea of offering more courses

in English in order to lower barriers for foreign students as well as to improve the language skills of their own students with a view to stays abroad. The possibility of more flexible allocation of curricula to the respective semesters was another topic. The fact that an internationalisation strategy requires more intensive communication between colleagues from different universities, and should not be limited to discussion at the administrative level, was also mentioned.

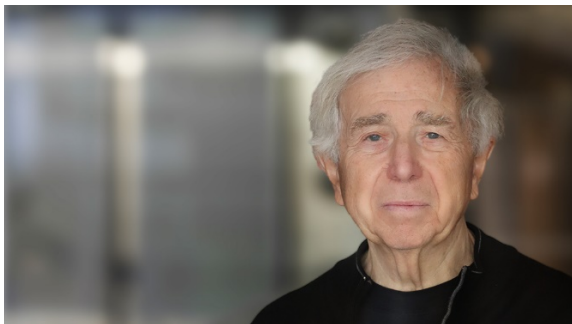
“The atmosphere in the workshop was very good and the colleagues in Spain were quite open to our suggestions,” Kratzer said. The main reason for that, in his view, is that the consultants themselves already have a lot of experience in practical implementation of the Bologna objectives. “We have for years been experiencing and testing for ourselves what works, what is practiced out in the real world, and what can actually be implemented. We're not merely theorists.”

Universities benefit from a range of perspectives

For Jelena Starčević, professor at University of East Sarajevo, Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, who also works as the assistant minister in the Ministry for Scientific and Technological Development, Higher Education and Information Society, the diversity of the pairs of consultants is another benefit of the project. Together with Volker Gehmlich, professor of business administration and English at the Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences, they completed a first peer-to-peer meeting with representatives of the University College Qirazi in Tirana, Albania. "Since Volker is from Germany and I am from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and we come from different scientific areas and have different professional backgrounds, we were able to bring a wide variety of perspectives to our consultation," Starčević said. The university's agenda included issues regarding mobility, credit recognition and quality assurance. "We had developed an extensive list of questions for the first online session. We were able to work out the specific

challenges for the university together during the meeting," Starčević said. Based on the results, the two consultants developed specific recommendations for the Albanian University and expect they will be carefully considered and implemented by the University before their next meeting.

Like Jelena Starčević, Volker Gehmlich has been working for many years internationally in connection with the Bologna process. He appreciates the intensive communication and sustainability provided by the Bologna Hub Peer Support project. "Unlike a lecture I give at a university, I'm still part of the process here when the effects of our suggestions become visible," he said. Above all, he says, his goal is to light a spark among the people in charge. "I want to convince universities that it's worthwhile not only to talk about quality assurance, but to define and commit to their own quality standards." Consequently, it is now also an important task for the Albanian university to discover its unique selling points and to make them visible to foreign students.



Thinking directly about future trends

The fact that implementation of the key commitments cannot be viewed in isolation from general trends and developments was very important to Eglantina Hysa during her consultation. The Albanian professor was an online guest, together with her German colleague Sonja Mikeska at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. "In the first meeting, we discussed internationalisation and quality assurance as well as innovative didactic methods," Hysa explained. "In the follow-up meeting, we also talked about the challenges the institute had to cope with during the coronavirus crisis." The experts are currently in the process of compiling a list of specific suggestions for the accreditation process

and the internationalisation of various programmes. "We particularly want to provide insights into future market demands that the faculty must take into account in order to maintain the quality of education." Here the issue primarily relates to incorporating new (digital) trends. Like her colleagues, Eglantina Hysa was positively surprised by how effective the dialogue was, despite the distance. Even so, she is still looking forward to meeting the participants in person in Poland during the second consultation. "When we experience the culture and the environment of the university directly, we can fill in our picture."

The German version of this article was published on 30 June 2021 auf [DAADAktuell](#).

Picture 1: Klaus Kratzer, Professor of Computer Science at the Ulm University of Technology.

Picture 2: Jelena Starčević is a professor at the University of East Sarajevo and additionally works as a deputy minister in the Ministry of Science and Technology Development, Higher Education and Information Society of Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Picture 3: Volker Gehmlich, Professor of Business Administration and English at Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences.

Picture 4: Dr. Eglantina Hysa is Associate Professor and Head of the Faculty of Economics at the private University of Epoka in the Albanian capital Tirana.