



**Amicus response to the Education and Skills Committee consultation
on the Bologna Process initiative in Higher Education**

Amicus is the UK's second largest trade union with 1.2 million members across the private and public sectors. Our members work in a range of industries including manufacturing, financial services, print, media, construction and not for profit sectors, local government, education and the NHS.

Amicus is one of the biggest trade unions working in the sector with 15,000 members working in higher education institutions. Amicus welcomes the chance to respond to this consultation and would be willing to make further written and verbal submissions about any of the issues raised.

Executive Summary

- i. Amicus broadly welcomes plans to harmonise the European higher education system in so far as it will benefit British society, the British economy and deepen European integration.
- ii. Amicus is especially supportive of the inclusion of social concerns about access to education and life-long learning into the process.
- iii. Amicus is opposed to the commercialisation of higher education and believes that education is a social right not a commodity.
- iv. Amicus is concerned that the process does not seem to have involved much consultation with support staff or their Unions.

- v. Any changes made to the structure of UK higher education needs to be adequately funded and Amicus would strongly oppose any attempts to raise funds by cutting jobs and staff terms.
- vi. Quality Assurance systems should not burden staff with extensive amounts of bureaucracy and further expensive quangos.

The Amicus case in detail

1. Amicus supports the aims of the Bologna process in as far as they are beneficial to the British higher education system. Higher education has many societal roles which are relevant both to the economy and to society as a whole. UNESCO describes "*the core missions and values of higher education*", as "*to contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole... educate highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity... to provide opportunities for higher learning and for learning throughout life... to educate for citizenship and for active participation in society... advance, create and disseminate knowledge, help understand, interpret, preserve, enhance, promote and disseminate national and regional, international and historic cultures... and help protect and enhance societal values*"¹ Amicus fully supports this position and calls on the government to promote higher education in this light.

2. Higher education plays a vital role in developing the British economy. As the UK's leading manufacturing union Amicus supports the government's aim to produce highly skilled workers, value added workplaces and increased investment in research and development. A highly skilled workforce requires an effective higher education system and is crucial in maintaining Britain's position as a world leader in the knowledge economy. The creation of a European Higher Education Area will improve the interaction of Europe's higher education systems as well as the ability of British workers and employers to take

¹ 'World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action' adopted by the World Conference on Higher Education, 9 October 1998

advantage of the employment opportunities created by the European common market.

3. Amicus is strongly committed to Article 26 in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights that declares that “*Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.*”² It is therefore welcome to see the inclusion in the Bergen communiqué of the commitment to make “*quality higher education equally accessible to all*” and support for students to “*complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background.*”³

4. There are still major barriers to merit based access to education in the UK. Research by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) suggests that over 50% of people from affluent backgrounds go to university while in some poorer areas it is less than 10%. This inequality is compounded by non-completion rates⁴. HEFCE also reports that these trends are contradicted in parts of Scotland where the use of alternative paths such as HNDs are more common and tuition fees do not exist. This suggests that these statistics can be improved. We are also yet to see the long term effects of the implementation of variable top-up fees. Amicus urges more work to be done to remove barriers to education, both in the UK and across the proposed European Higher Education Area.

5. Amicus reaffirms its belief that education should not end when people enter the workplace. Education and development provide people with choices, and hence control, over the way they earn a living and the way they live their lives. The increased recognition of lifelong learning

² ‘United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ December 1948
<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

³ ‘The European Higher Education Area - Achieving the Goals, Communiqué of the Conference of

European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education,’ Bergen, 19-20 May 2005

⁴ ‘Young participation in higher education,’ HEFCE, January 2005/03

in the various Bologna process Communiqués has been welcome, however Amicus notes with dismay that lifelong learning “*has been very much neglected so far in the Bologna discussions.*”⁵ Amicus urges the UK government to put more emphasis on this during its tenure as Secretariat to the Bologna Follow Up Group and its Board.

6. Amicus is opposed to the commercialisation of higher education and supports the view of the European University Association (EUA) that: “*higher education exists to serve the public interest and is not a commodity.*”⁶ The Bologna process should view its mission for education in this light and not seek to use the project to further extend the market in higher education. The introduction of profit motives, competition and an increased reliance on corporate funding to the sector could further reduce the independence of academic research⁷ and skew funding away from courses that have more of a social benefit than a financial one⁸.
7. The Bologna process should not have a major impact on the growth of foundation degrees. Amicus believes that these are a useful gateway to skills and employment as well as broader higher education. Amicus would stress though that foundation degrees need to become better integrated into the whole higher education system. They should provide opportunities to widen educational choices rather than corralling students down specific career paths.
8. Amicus is concerned about the level of consultation that has been taking place on this process. Decisions on the future of UK higher education need to take into account the views of all stakeholders

⁵ ‘Trends IV: European Universities Implementing Bologna,’ Sybille Reichert & Christian Tauch, European University Association, April 2005

⁶ ‘Joint Declaration on Higher Education and the General Agreement on Trade in Services’, signed by European University Association (EUA) and various North American bodies.

⁷ ‘Is corporate funding steering research institutions off track?’ Dan Ferber. *The Scientist*, February 2002 and ‘Exposed: the secret corporate funding behind health research’ G. Monibot, *Education Guardian* 7 February 2006

⁸ ‘University courses face closure under Gats’ Polly Curtis, *Education Guardian*, 29 October 2002

including students, academic, administrative and support staff. The whole process needs to be made far more transparent and visible. These developments will have an effect on the work of all staff in higher education and they should be adequately consulted on all changes. Trade unions should be central to this process.

9. Any changes made to the structure of UK higher education system need to be adequately funded. Even with recent increases, salaries of all staff in the higher education sector have fallen considerably behind those of comparators in other sectors. For example technicians in the aerospace sector earn a minimum of about £21,000⁹ where as starting salaries in higher education are around £12,000¹⁰. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) claims that if *“pay is to increase at rates which enable it to keep pace with other professions, there will need to be substantial increases in expenditure on pay in the second decade of this century.”*¹¹ The OECD claims that the UK spends 1.1 per cent of GDP on tertiary education. This is lower than the figures given for the US (2.9 per cent) and Scandinavian countries (1.8 per cent) although it does recognise that significant improvements have been taking place.¹² Amicus supports the government aims to continue to make further significant and sustained increases to the budgets for higher education and research councils, but stresses the need to invest more into higher education staff.

10. Plans under the Bologna process that could lead to increases in the length of degrees and more teaching and supervision will inevitably increase the costs for universities. Unless funding is increased this added cost would inevitably be made up through higher fees and cost saving such as cuts in support staff or their terms and conditions. Amicus is concerned about the impact of higher fees on equal access

⁹ ‘Amicus Aerospace pay survey’ 2006

¹⁰ ‘Pay in the public services 2006,’ Incomes Data Services

¹¹ ‘The prosperity of English universities: income growth and the prospects for new investment’ HEPI, September 2006

¹² Ibid.

<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/downloads/26Incomeandexpendituregrowthexecutivesummary.pdf>

and would strongly oppose any attempts balance the books by cutting jobs or staff terms and conditions.

11. Amicus is in favour of harmonising and improving quality assurance systems internationally across the sector. This should be an opportunity to reduce the burden on staff of extensive amounts of bureaucracy and streamline the numbers of expensive quangos that exist across the UK and European Higher Education Area. Amicus believes that quality assurance guidelines need to be clear and simple if they are to be effective. They also need to be agreed through consultation with staff and their unions in order to make sure that they are appropriate.

Mike Robinson, Amicus National Officer for the Education Sector

Unit 1, Kings Chambers

Hertford Place, Coventry, West Midlands CV1 3JZ

For clarifications or further information please contact:

James Lazou, Research Officer

E-mail: James.Lazou@amicustheunion.org

Tel: 020 7780 4020

Edskillscom@parliament.uk

Education and Skills Select Committee

House of Commons

7 Millbank

London SW1P 3JA

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