

Lessons from the Bologna decade

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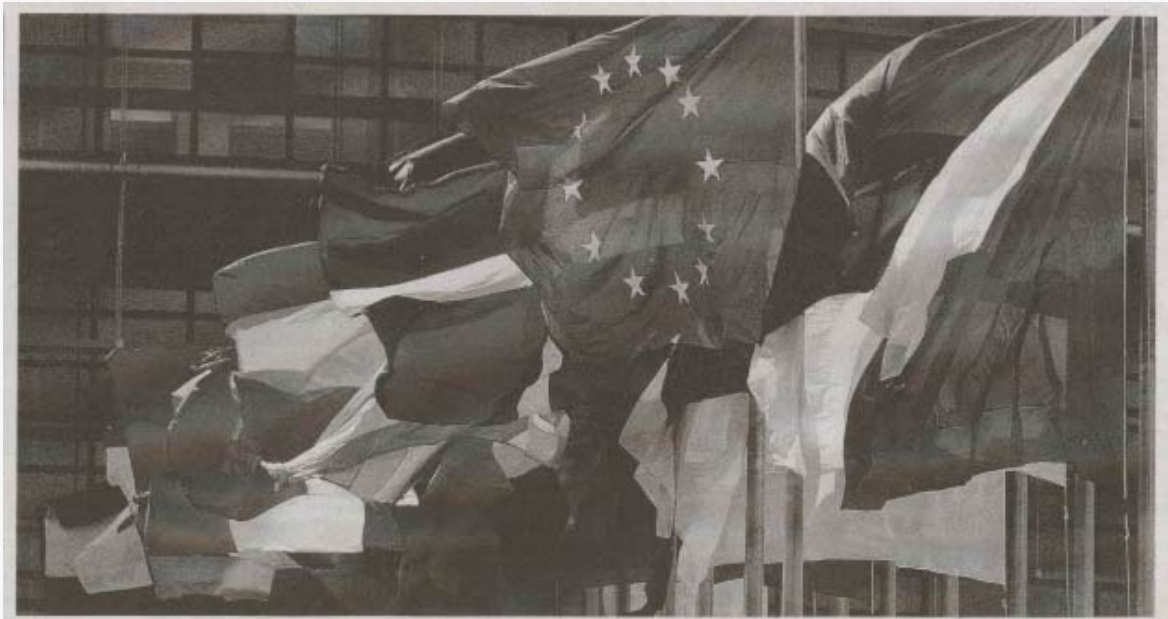
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THE recent Second Ministerial Bologna Policy Forum in Vienna, Austria ended on a positive note.

It was participated not only by 47 countries, which are signatory to the Bologna framework for higher education, but also other non-European counterparts such as Malaysia.

More significantly, the Forum marked the 10th year of the Bologna Process, which was established in 1999 by a handful of countries in "old" Europe.

The many achievements that Europe has collectively secured (though not without several teething problems) in the process of creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are attributed to the Bologna Process.



The European Union flag flies amongst the 25 member countries' national flags in front of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France. The Bologna Policy Forum is one classic example of a transformation process that greatly affects higher education across the European continent

Undoubtedly, it is one classic example of a transformation process that greatly affects higher education across the European continent.

The fact that some 47 countries, and counting, have endorsed it indicates that the Bologna Process is a welcome move as it offers many invaluable lessons.

That it took a decade to arrive at the stage it is in today proves that change is possible despite complexities involved.

The Bologna Process addresses the challenges of the future, some of which were spelt out at the conclusion of the Forum as a matter of urgency.

They were, among others, the response to multiplicity of demands, the issue of brain drain, brain gain and more interestingly brain "circulation", as well as competition versus co-operation.

These are, however, only the tip of the iceberg.

Universities globally, notably those from developing countries, may have many other priorities such as the survival of not only the institution but also the nation.

By remaining insular to future demands, universities and higher education in general -- in its present form and structure -- will be hard-pressed to navigate through the new century.

The risk of failing the mission of making basic education accessible to the public is even more imminent, implying that the transformation of higher education is crucial.

The question is, what kind of transformation?

For Malaysia, similar questions were posed by Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin when he opened the third session of the 12th Parliament last week.

"Our focus will remain on Malaysia's niche and potential areas as well as those in the high-value chains that are capable of generating greater returns," said the King in his speech.

The King emphasised the need for innovation, creativity and high-value creation in all sectors.

Tuanku Mizan also called on the people to be far-sighted and ready to accept changes.

He described the New Economic Model as the vehicle for the transformation of Malaysia, and, like it or not, this has great implications for the education system, particularly on higher education and in the areas of knowledge generation.

No doubt the Bologna Process is one that is not only transformative but also far-sighted.

The process strives to establish the general framework for the modernisation of European universities while attracting significant attention worldwide.

One of the highlights of the Bologna Process is its goal to promote the social dimension of higher education.

Although this was not identified during its inception, it was later incorporated in 2007.

The London Communique defined it as the "societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations".

Generally, this includes under-represented social groups linked to socio-economic background or parents' educational achievement, minority status or disability.

This is reportedly associated with educational and societal failure prior to higher education.

The Bologna Process' aims become even more significant given the prevailing economic crisis especially when it results in severe education budget cuts.

Vulnerable groups will fall by the way side if the social dimensions of education are neglected, and this will in turn prolong the poverty cycle.

In a nutshell, the success of the first Bologna decade should convince us that transformation of higher education is not only necessary but can also be systematically carried out.

It has provided Europe with a wealth of experience spanning more than 40 countries with their own unique characteristics to support the socio-economic well-being of the region.

If this can be attempted with enviable success Europe-wide, there is no reason why Malaysia cannot do likewise, especially in supporting the evolution of an advanced society in 2020 as a focus under the National Key Results Areas - exactly a decade from now.

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