A Practical Guide to Bologna Tools and Instruments

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INTRODUCTION

The new bachelor’s and master’s ‘Bologna degrees’ started filtering into evaluators’ inboxes at World Education Services (WES) soon after the first graduating class – 2002/03 – began applying for a U.S. equivalency of their newly awarded degrees. As the European educational reform movement, known commonly as the Bologna Process, has gained pace, so those charged with evaluating the new degrees in the United States have started acquainting themselves with the reforms and their implications.

In previous issues of WENR we have: documented the challenges and the progress being made towards the 2010 goal of a European Higher Education Area [The Bologna Process as Seen From the Outside]; described the new Bologna bachelor’s degree, comparing and contrasting it with traditional long degrees in Europe [The Bologna Bachelor’s Degree: An Overview]; and, in last years’ March/April issue, we compared the bachelor’s degree in business administration from Indiana University’s Kelly School of Business with that from the Bocconi University in Milan, Italy [Evaluating the Bologna Degree in the US].

We begin this article by providing a practical guide to the new tools and documents that credential evaluators can expect to receive in the coming years together with the new ‘Bologna degrees’. We have included a sampling of documents received at WES as well as generic documents provided by the European Commission and national ministries of education. The second part of the article will outline some of the issues that are beginning to surface in Bologna-related discussions regarding degree equivalencies and international student flows.

BACKGROUND

The Bologna Process is a fundamental restructuring of higher education in Europe, of which the introduction of three cycles – bachelor, master and doctoral – in lieu of the traditional long program is the single most important feature. Traditionally, students who failed to complete a first university degree program at a European university had nothing to show for their many years of study and the courses that they had completed. Therefore, one of the key goals of the reform movement is to improve graduation rates at European universities and more efficiently prepare students for the labor market.

A realignment of this size and magnitude affecting higher education across 40 signatory countries is truly a unique and enormous undertaking. The last major European higher education reform movement was what is referred to as "the massification of higher education," which took place in the 1960s and 1970s. That process saw the creation of non-university institutions of higher education that were distinct from universities and never enjoyed the same status as them. An essential aspect of the Bologna reforms, therefore, is its emphasis on lifelong learning and the importance of incorporating professional and technical schools as equal partners within the structure of the European tertiary system.

Originally signed in 1999, the Bologna Declaration is an agreement now covering 40 countries to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010. In addition to a fundamental restructuring of degree systems, signatories to Bologna have agreed to promote quality assurance systems, remove obstacles to the mobility of students, implement a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, and establish a common credit system. The following is offered as a guide to some of the transparency and mobility tools that have been introduced to help achieve those goals.
Programs and degrees will be expressed using the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

What is the ECTS?

The ECTS is a key tool in the promotion of academic mobility within, to, and from Europe. First introduced by the European Commission in 1989, within the framework of the Erasmus mobility program to facilitate credit transfer for tertiary-level students spending study periods abroad, the ECTS has since been adopted as the standard credit transfer and accumulation system to be used in all countries and institutions that have adopted the Bologna reforms.

As part of the ECTS process, European institutions are required to disseminate an array of supporting information in the form of three main tools: institutional information catalogs, the ECTS study contract between institutions and between the institution and student, and the transcript of records.

The credit, what is it and how does it work?

The ECTS is a credit system based on a definition of what constitutes a full-time academic course load, reflecting the quantity of work each course requires of a student in relation to the total quantity of work required to complete a full year of academic study at a particular institution. Credits are assigned to all academic work (lectures, laboratory work, seminars, examinations, private study and theses) that comprises an integral part of the program of study.

Credits are awarded only when the course has been completed and all required examinations have been successfully taken. In ECTS terms, 60 credits represent the workload of one year of full-time study, 30 credits are given for a semester and 20 credits for a trimester. Sixty credits stands for an average workload of around 1500 hours, which corresponds to around 25 student work hours per credit. In ECTS terms a bachelor’s degree consists of 180 to 240 credits. A master’s degree should normally represent an additional 60 or 120 credits, for a total of 300 credits. Within this framework, institutions and faculties allocate credits among their various courses.

- See sample transcript with ECTS credit allocations

THE ECTS INFORMATION PACKAGE/COURSE CATALOG

European nations are increasingly promoting themselves as international study destinations. This has led to a dramatic increase in the quantity and quality of informational outputs on education systems and program offerings in a manner that is increasingly consistent and systematic across the emerging European Higher Education Area.

The ECTS information package resembles a US university catalog. It provides up-to-date information on the institution, faculty, organization and structure of programs and courses. It is available in hard copy and online, and the information is updated annually. It offers also descriptions covering the content, prerequisites, mode of assessment, time unit, type of course, teaching and learning methods employed and ECTS credits allocated by the department offering the course or program.

Sample Information Packages (Bearing Quality Label)

- Deusto University, Bilbao (Spain)
- Agricultural University of Wroclaw (Poland)
- Agder University College (Norway)

THE TRANSCRIPT OF RECORDS

The new European academic transcript breaks the learning achievements of the student into individual course or module units and shows the course weighting in terms of ECTS credits. The transcript also shows the grades awarded according to the local grading scale and the ECTS grading scale.

- See generic and specific examples

ECTS GRADES

Many different grading scales currently co-exist in Europe. In order to facilitate the mobility of students and their grades...
between institutions, an ECTS grading system has been developed to complement the award of ECTS credits. This provides additional information alongside that provided on the transcript, but does not replace the local grade. Receiving institutions make their own decision on how to apply the ECTS grading scale to their own system. Grades are reported on a carefully calibrated and uniform A-F scale combined with keywords and short qualitative definitions.

**WES GRADING SCALE EQUIVALENCY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECTS Scale</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Percentage of Successful Student/s Normally Achieving the Grade</th>
<th>U.S. Grade Equivalents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>EXCELLENT - outstanding performance with only minor errors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>VERY GOOD - above the average standard but with some errors</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>A-/B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>GOOD - generally sound work with a number of notable errors</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>SATISFACTORY - fair but with significant shortcomings</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>C+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>SUFFICIENT - performance meets the minimum criteria</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FX</td>
<td>FAIL - some more work required before the credit can be awarded</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>FAIL - considerable further work is required</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THE DIPLOMA SUPPLEMENT**

The Diploma Supplement (DS) was introduced to provide independent data designed to improve the international transparency and fair academic and professional recognition of academic credentials. As its name implies, it is issued together with a final diploma or degree. The DS provides a description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies successfully completed by the individual named on the original qualification.
Institutions are expected to follow the standard DS format and provide all the information elements specified in the template. The DS is composed of eight sections (information identifying the holder of the qualification, information identifying the qualification, information on the level of the qualification, information on the contents and results gained, information on the function of the qualification, additional information, certification of the DS, information on the national higher education system). The DS is not a substitute for a diploma or degree; it is issued in addition (as a supplement) to the qualification itself. However, institutions are required to apply the same authentication procedures, such as an official stamp and signature, as for the diploma.

- See DS model and examples

**ENIC-NARIC NETWORK**

The European Network of Information Centers (ENIC) and National Academic Recognition and Information Centers (NARIC) located in each participating country serve as additional sources of information to aid degree recognition and equivalency. The ENIC-NARIC website provides information on national systems of education. It also provides the contact information of the agencies and individuals that are available to answer queries about a country's educational structure and qualifications, with the goal of facilitating cross-border degree recognition.

- [http://www.enic-naric.net/](http://www.enic-naric.net/)

**How is the implementation monitored?**

While many countries in Europe are at various stages of implementing the Bologna reforms, it has become evident to those involved in the process that there is a need to provide some simple reference points with regard to student workload and learning outcomes to guarantee the legitimacy, transparency and effectiveness of the process.

While the framework of the Bologna reforms have been set by the ministers of education of the signatory countries, it is the working groups composed of academics, students and employers who are negotiating to make sure that degree programs are properly set and calibrated across disciplines and across the participating countries through a process known as Tuning.

The name Tuning was chosen for the project to reflect the idea that universities do not necessarily look for harmonization of their degree programs but simply for points of reference, convergence and common understanding.

The project Tuning Educational Structures in Europe has, in part, been undertaken to ensure that credit allocations for courses or modules are defined across Europe by similar and equitable competences and subject-related learning outcomes (i.e. what skills are students acquiring from a certain degree program and how can they be compared to other degrees in the same field at other institutions of higher education within Europe?). This concerns both subject specific competences and generic competences, like communication skills and leadership. The Tuning process is also designed to take into account a range of other variables, such as teaching methods and diversity of traditions so as not to restrict academic or institutional autonomy.

For more information on Tuning go here:

- [Phase 1](#)
- [Phase 2](#)

**ECTS Standards of Good Practice**

The European Commission in November 2004 awarded, for the first time, the ECTS Label to 11 institutions. The ECTS Label is awarded to institutions which apply ECTS correctly in all first- and second-cycle degree programs. The Label is designed to raise the profile of nominated institutions as transparent and reliable partners in European and international cooperation.

The ECTS label is awarded for three academic years. In addition to applying ECTS credits correctly to all academic programs, institutions are required to make widely available (online and in hard copy) information packages/course catalogs in two languages (or only in English for programs taught in English), samples of learning agreements, transcripts of records and proof of academic recognition.

- [List of Institutions awarded ECTS Label](#)
**Diploma Supplement Standards of Good Practice**

Similar to the ECTS Label, the Diploma Supplement Label is awarded to institutions that ensure transparency and recognition by issuing supplements that meet the guidelines set by those who developed the model DS. In the first round of applications and selections, conducted in November 2003, 85 institutions applied for the Diploma Supplement Label of which 28 were awarded Labels (75 percent were from Nordic countries).

- [List of institutions awarded the Diploma Supplement Label](#)

**The Bologna Bachelor's Degree Equivalency Issues**

The last few months have witnessed an increasing volume of literature on the Bologna degrees in both professional journals and in the mainstream press. Much of the discussion on this side of the Atlantic has focused on the challenges that now face U.S. colleges and university admissions offices and professional evaluation services in finding a fair and balanced equivalency for the new European three-year degree.

Different views have emerged around the issues and, as the process of evaluating foreign degrees in the United States is entirely independent from any national authority, it is no surprise that a range of interpretations and decisions have been proposed. The crux of the debate centers on whether or not the new three-year bachelor’s degree is comparable to a US degree and constitutes adequate preparation for graduate studies at institutions in the United States (i.e. is it equivalent to a U.S. four-year bachelor's degree?).

In the view of those for whom the number of years is the most prominent consideration when judging a degree, a three-year degree cannot be compared to the US degree, which requires a minimum of 120 semester credits and is typically completed in four years. Moreover, they argue that accepting the Bologna first degree as equivalent to its U.S. counterpart for graduate admissions is unfair to domestic students who are required to complete the equivalent of four years of undergraduate study.

From a functional standpoint, as we suggested in a previous issue of *WENR*, it is the scope and intent of the new Bologna degrees that should be evaluated rather than a count of the years a student has spent at university. As an example we compared the bachelor's degree in business administration from Indiana University's Kelly School of Business with the new three-year degree from the Bocconi University in Milan. We concluded that while the Kelly School of Business program was a year longer, the two degrees are functionally equivalent. Although the general education component common to U.S. bachelor's programs is not a feature of the Italian university system, the depth and scope of the new three-year *laurea* more than adequately prepares students for entry-level management jobs or for the rigors of a master's program at a U.S. institution of higher education.

**US-Europe Mobility Issues**

One of the main objectives of the Bologna Process is to facilitate educational and professional mobility within Europe and beyond by making qualifications coherent and transparent.

The harmonization of degree structures across Europe is designed not only to make the various systems of education better understood, but also as the cornerstone of a policy to increase the number of non-European students enrolling at European institutions of higher education.

In order to attract international students, European universities have started to offer detailed information on academic programs, housing, student services as well as other requirements such as health insurance, visa and residency rules. Many are starting to offer credit-bearing courses taught in English (approximately 1,500 master programs were offered during the 2003/04 academic year in countries where English is not the first language). These features alone represent a significant transformation for European universities, which are now more outward looking and responsive to the needs of students, including international students.

Although this trend can be seen to represent a challenge to U.S. institutions of higher education in terms of international student recruitment, the Bologna Process also presents future recruitment opportunities. A recent report by GMAC (Graduate Management Admission Council), a global business school association, assessed the possible implications of the structural changes of the Bologna Process in the context of graduate management education. The report concluded, in part, that the reforms will result in a huge increase in the number of post-Bologna bachelor graduates, many of whom will be seeking entry to master's-level programs. If the findings of the report can be extended beyond the domain of management education to all fields of study, then, from the perspective of U.S. universities and colleges this newly enlarged pool of European bachelor graduates can be seen as a possible boon to recruitment opportunities.
In conclusion, the Bologna Process is impacting the way in which U.S. admissions offices evaluate European credentials. Their work, however, is being made much easier by the abundance of information that is being made available as European nations increase the attractiveness and transparency of their tertiary-level credentials. Furthermore, the speed with which information is being made available both online and in hard copy means that the evaluator in the United States more than ever has the tools necessary to make informed decisions when assessing the new European degrees.