The Bologna Process:
As Seen From the Outside

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Across the Atlantic, unbeknownst to many Americans, higher education in Europe is undergoing a profound transformation. More and more countries are uprooting their traditional systems of education, which feature long degrees, in favor of a two-tiered model based on bachelor's and master's degrees. A standard credit system is also being adopted, and efforts are underway to promote regional quality assurance. The reforms, known collectively as the Bologna Process, will no doubt impact Europe in many ways, but they also hold significant implications for international educational exchanges in the United States.

The Bologna Declaration was issued following a meeting of the European Ministers of Education held in Bologna in 1999, and set into motion a “process” (thus the Bologna Process) aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. To achieve this goal, the Declaration called for the following:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
- Adoption of a degree structure based on two main cycles (undergraduate and graduate)
- Adoption of a system of credits (to enable students to transfer and accumulate credits)
- Elimination of obstacles that impede mobility of students and job seekers
- Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance
- Promotion of necessary European dimension in higher education

Hence, the long term objectives of the reforms outlined in the Bologna Process are essentially threefold:

1) To facilitate the speedy entrance of educated professionals into the job market through shortened degrees.

2) To enhance the cross-border mobility of students and job seekers.

3) To increase the competitiveness of European higher education internationally.

How Big is it?

The Bologna Process is a massive undertaking that encompasses most of Europe, and continues to expand geographically picking up new member states at each ministerial meeting.

Originally, there were 29 signatory countries to the Bologna Declaration, and shortly thereafter Liechtenstein was retroactively added. Then in 2001 at the Prague conference, Cyprus, Croatia and Turkey joined. At the most recent meeting in Berlin last September, seven more countries (Albania, Andorra, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Holy See, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro and the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia) were admitted bringing the number up to 40.

With Russia's membership, the Bologna Process now literally stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific. When it is completed in 2010, the EHEA will include over 12 million students and 4,000 universities across Europe. An educational reform movement on such a grand scale has never before been attempted in Europe, or elsewhere for that matter.

Bologna Update
It has been only four years since the historic signing at Bologna, and much of the necessary groundwork for the EHEA has already been laid. The breakneck speed at which the reforms are being implemented has taken many observers and especially skeptics by complete surprise. Many of them are particularly astounded at the way the Bologna Process is shaking up and reformulating traditional structures of higher education that have remained unchanged for centuries.

According to Univers Foreign Affairs, 80% of the signatory countries have already introduced the two-tiered degree structure, clearly dividing undergraduate from graduate studies. More than half of all participating institutions of higher education (53 percent) are currently implementing the Bologna reforms, while just over a third (36 percent) are still in the planning phase. Only 11 percent of these institutions have indicated they are not interested in adopting the two-tiered system.

At the present time all the Scandinavian countries are in the process of introducing bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Denmark, for example, will soon adopt the two-tiered system in all disciplines, including medicine and chemistry.

In a particularly daring move, Italy has discarded its traditional laurea degree and adopted the 3+2 structure (three-year bachelor’s and two-year master’s).

Likewise, universities in the Netherlands are currently in the process of converting their one-tier programs to bachelor’s and master’s programs.

In Austria, legislation has been passed requiring all new academic programs to follow the two-tiered system.

Germany has introduced the two-tiered system on an experimental basis and currently offers a three-year bachelor’s degree alongside the traditional one-tiered system.

The United Kingdom and Ireland are signatories to the Bologna Declaration, but because these countries have always had education systems based on bachelor’s and master’s degrees they will not have to implement significant changes.

The countries of eastern and central Europe present an interesting case as far as the Bologna Process is concerned. Until 1989, when the communist eastern bloc collapsed, the educational systems in this region were largely influenced by the Soviet model of higher education.

Following independence, new laws were passed in east European countries that ended the state monopoly on education, promoted the liberalization of curricula, and adopted a two-tiered system of degrees based on the Anglo/American model. Hence, eastern Europe has actually been well ahead of the curve in terms of introducing the types of reforms called for in the 1999 Bologna Declaration.

Institutions in the Czech Republic, for instance, have offered degrees at the bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral level—alongsides the traditional one-tiered system—since 1990. In addition, many institutions have introduced tuition-based, short-term and degree programs for international students.

Hungary similarly adopted a two-tiered system of higher education shortly after it gained independence. New MBA degrees have also been introduced and are offered through specialized, postgraduate programs.

Challenges

Despite the steady progress made in implementing many of the Bologna reforms, degree structures among the signatory countries remain largely divergent. The two-tiered system is still more clearly defined in some education systems than in others (in some countries, the master’s and bachelor’s degrees are viewed as separate qualifications, whereas in others, the master’s is still seen as an extension of the bachelor’s). So far, Austria, the Netherlands, Norway and Italy have made the most headway in truncating their long degrees.

Other countries are proceeding cautiously. Spain and Portugal, for instance, have endorsed the Bologna Process in theory, but in practice have still not implemented many reforms. Greece has rejected the two-tiered system outright, and Switzerland has shown signs of resistance, although the Swiss legislature recently passed a law preparing for the implementation of a new degree structure that is compatible with the Bologna reforms.

There have been other pockets of resistance as well among students and institutions of higher education. Although the student organizations and universities play an integral role in implementing the reforms, particularly at the local level,
some members of these groups continue to suspiciously regard the Bologna Process as a possible manifestation of market-driven globalization.

The Bologna Process has also engendered a certain amount of xenophobia among the old guard, who decry the abandonment of their traditional university systems—emblems of history and national pride—in favor of an imported system imposed from the top down.

But Bologna supporters deny that the reforms will lead to a homogenized system of higher education based on the Anglo/American model. They argue that the Bologna Process will foster compatibility among Europe's different higher education systems, while maintaining respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.

In the end most educators, even the detractors, know the reforms are here to stay. The gradual erosion of the Welfare State and the rapid globalization of knowledge have brought about a fundamental reexamination of Europe's traditional systems of higher education. The utilization of new technologies in distance learning programs, the predominance of English as the world's lingua franca and the international demand for short degrees all present formidable challenges to European systems of higher education.

In the last 10 years, the market for international students (particularly students from Asia) has heated up considerably, and Europeans fear that if they don't act decisively they could end up falling behind while the United States and its competitors (Australia, Canada and the UK) corner the market. Last year, for instance, 267,111 Asian students enrolled in higher education programs in the United States compared to only 178,000 who studied in Europe.

If Europe wants to attract more students from abroad it must offer degrees and programs that are compatible with international structures. Newly reformed higher education in the EHEA, along with relatively low tuition fees, will hopefully make Europe a viable option for many international students who cannot or will not pay the high cost of education in North America or Australia.

Looking Beyond Europe

By 2010 there will be standard recognized European degrees at the bachelor's, master's or doctoral level in much the same way as they exist in the U.S. Like the introduction of the new currency, the Euro, the establishment of the EHEA will ensure the convertibility of qualifications among the participating countries. Degrees earned in, say, Germany will immediately be recognized in France, and the holder of those qualifications will automatically be eligible for work or study in any of the Bologna signatory countries.

For the United States the effects of the Bologna Process are difficult to predict, but a few things are clear. At the moment, the biggest challengers to the U.S. in the international student market are Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In the future, with its transparent and flexible higher education system, Europe will offer an attractive alternative. The EHEA may end up challenging American dominance in international higher education, in much the same way that the European Union has become a counterweight in international trade vis-a-vis the U.S. and Japan.

There will also be greater convergence between the U.S. and Europe as European higher education adopts aspects of the American system. There is a long tradition of academic exchange programs between European and American institutions of higher education. A more transparent and flexible European higher education system will undoubtedly enhance the number of student exchanges between the two continents. This is important for both sides. There are currently 64,811 European students studying in the US--14 percent of the total international enrollment. Germany, the U.K., France Spain and Greece are the top sending countries, but the number of students from the former eastern bloc countries like Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary is on the rise.

At the same time, the majority of U.S. students who study abroad are in Europe mostly attending special programs designed solely for them. According to Open Doors 2002, of the five top study destinations for Americans, four are in western Europe. The United Kingdom accounts for almost 20 percent of all U.S study abroad followed by Italy, Spain and France.

The implementation of shorter degrees that are taught in English--together with relatively lower tuition cost- will make it easier for American students to enroll in regular degree programs at European universities and to transfer their credits.

But Europe and the United States are not the only actors here. While the reforms are being implemented within the signatory countries, the planners of the EHEA are beginning to look beyond Europe. At the last follow up meeting held in Berlin (Sept. 2003), the Ministers of Education advocated the need to encourage cooperation with other parts of the world,
and to open up future Bologna events to representatives of non-European countries. In particular, they declared the necessity to actively promote the new EHEA abroad to attract students and researchers from non-participating countries.

LINKS

Articles


• *International Higher Education*, Summer 2003. Bologna is not the Only City that Matters in European Higher Education Policy

• *WENR*, January/February 2000. Bologna Declaration Addresses Higher Education in European Union

• *WENR*, March/April 2001. The Bologna Process: How It is Changing the Face of Higher Education in Europe

Web Sites

• *ACE Admissions Officers and Credential Evaluators: Bologna Process*

• *Austrian Bologna Web Site*

• *Berlin-Bologna Web Page*