Europe's Higher-Education Restructuring Holds Lessons for U.S., Report Says

By Aisha Labi

The American higher-education establishment is beginning to take notice of the Bologna Process, the decade-long effort to harmonize degree cycles and university systems across Europe, and this newfound interest comes not a moment too soon, says Clifford Adelman, of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, in a new report released today.

In the report, “The Bologna Process for U.S. Eyes: Re-Learning Higher Education in the Age of Convergence,” Mr. Adelman, a senior associate at the institute, bluntly makes the case for why the United States can no longer afford to rest on its laurels.

“We’ve had a good run,” he writes. “But we are no longer at the cutting edge. U.S. higher education can no longer sail on the assumption of world dominance, oblivious to the creative energies, natural intelligence, and hard work of other nations.”

The report’s release was timed to another Bologna-related project. This week the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation for Education, which financed Mr. Adelman’s research, is unveiling a pilot project that will apply certain aspects of the Bologna Process to six disciplines in the higher-education systems of three states—Indiana, Minnesota, and Utah. The disciplines are biology, chemistry, education, history, physics, and graphic design.

For the project, groups of faculty members and students from universities in each participating state will survey current students, recent graduates, and employers in an effort to define the knowledge and skills that a degree in a given discipline represents. Indiana will survey two of the three subject areas, and Minnesota and Utah will survey two. The information will also be used to track how student achievement translates into employability.

European nations are entering the final phase of the Bologna Process, which Mr. Adelman calls “the most far-reaching and ambitious reform of higher education ever undertaken.”
The effort, which was begun by the education ministers of 29 European countries in 1999, will culminate in the creation next year of the European Higher Education Area. The Bologna region now encompasses 46 nations, including Britain, Russia, and Turkey. Much of the work that has gone into ensuring openness and the recognition of degrees across national borders could prove directly applicable to American higher education.

Getting in Tune

A key component of the Bologna Process is the so-called Tuning model, which does not prescribe uniformity among colleges but aligns goals for student achievement in individual disciplines.

Other countries, including those that compete with the United States to attract foreign students, have already begun to examine how to apply the Tuning methodology, according to Tim Birtwistle, a Bologna expert and professor of law and higher-education policy at Britain’s Leeds Metropolitan University, and a consultant on the Lumina project.

Australia and New Zealand have been tracking the effort closely, and both India and China are paying close attention to Bologna’s qualifications framework, he said. A Tuning project involving 18 Latin American countries is already under way.

“The great thing about Tuning is that it is bottom up and culturally transferable,” said Mr. Birtwistle. The model emphasizes engaging faculty members, students, recent graduates, and employers, and using their input to build a profile of an effective degree program. “It involves the whole spectrum and links into employability agendas, but at the same time, it has a social dimension, with students at the center of process.”

This student focus and emphasis on the social dimension of higher education, including increasing participation among underserved populations, is one of the central components of the Bologna Process. One of the Lumina foundation’s goals is to increase the share of the American population with high-quality degrees and credentials from 39 percent to 60 percent by 2025.

American interest in the Bologna Process has been growing steadily as the process enters its final phase.

“Increasingly, U.S. education conferences and meetings include sessions on Bologna,” Mr. Adelman said. “People are waking up, not merely to the fact that higher education has gone global. In an age of convergence, people are becoming attuned, as they’ve never been before, to the fact that the borders are down.”

The new report, which builds upon a 2008 report by Mr. Adelman, “The Bologna Club: What U.S. Higher Education Can Learn From a Decade of European Reconstruction,” is, like that previous publication, aimed
primarily at bringing American university leaders up to speed about the Bologna Process. In the year since the earlier report’s release, the landscape has already shifted.

“Cliff has been an incredible one-man band of sorts for getting the word out there,” said Madeleine F. Green, vice president for international initiatives at the American Council on Education. Recent Bologna-focused sessions at ACE meetings have been filled, she said.

This growing interest has been prompted by different sets of concerns at the institutional and at the policy level, Ms. Green noted.

The first degree in the Bologna cycle is a three-year undergraduate degree. There has been a lot of conversation among American graduate schools about how to interpret the new European Diploma Supplement, Ms. Green said, speaking of the document that will be attached to a European undergraduate diploma to indicate international standards have been met. The Bologna institutions “have undertaken an ambitious effort to define what an undergraduate degree is,” she said, and American graduate schools are paying close attention, for obvious practical reasons.

“At the big-picture, policy level, there is a broader discussion of what we can learn over all as a nation or at a state level from European efforts to bring together 46 very different systems of higher education and ‘harmonize’ them, since we have the 50-state issue,” Ms. Green said. The Tuning project, which involves attaching goals to specific disciplines, is just one element of Bologna that has piqued this growing interest.

“Increasingly, people are thinking maybe there’s something in here for us. We don’t have a history of looking to other countries and saying, What can we learn? But we are beginning to,” said Ms. Green.

The United States will for the first time send an official observer to the biannual ministerial conference on the Bologna Process later this month in Belgium.