On Accountability, Consider Bologna

Impressed by American higher education’s embrace of accountability?

You shouldn’t be, according to a new policy brief on the Bologna Process from the Institute for Higher Education Policy. Written by Clifford Adelman, a senior associate at the institute, the document “contends that none of the major pronouncements on accountability in U.S. higher education that we have heard in the recent past – from Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings’ Commission on the Future of Higher Education to platitude pronouncements and wish lists for student learning from the higher education community — even begin to understand what accountability means.”

Meanwhile, Adelman contends that across the Atlantic, the nearly decade-old, 46-country higher education reform initiative known as the Bologna Process offers lessons for what real accountability – not “accountability light” – looks like. And out of Europe’s efforts to make colleges, continent-wide, “more compatible and comparable,” Adelman identifies a series of “reconstructive recommendations” for American higher education.

As the policy paper, entitled “Learning Accountability from Bologna: A Higher Education Policy Primer,” states, “accountability in higher education begins with the establishment of public definitions of degrees and criterion-referenced statements of academic performance so that when an institution awards a credential it can assert, with confidence: ‘This is what this degree represents, this is what the student did to earn the degree, and a warrantee has been issued on behalf of both institution and student.’”

“I want to be able to look at a degree like I’m looking through the window right now, and see what’s on the other side,” Adelman said in an interview Friday. “We can’t do that with U.S. degrees today.”

The policy paper starts with an explanation of Europe’s use of “qualifications frameworks,” defined as sets of learning outcomes and competencies that a student must demonstrate in order to receive a degree “at a specific level.” (“It is not a statement of objectives or goals. It is not a wish list. It is a performance criterion.”) European nations have taken different approaches to developing qualifications frameworks that define common outcomes by degree level — and, it’s worth noting, only 7 of the 46 have completed the complex process so far. Of those that have, Ireland, for instance, created a 10-level framework, stretching “from kindergarten to doctorate.” The Netherlands tied the labor market into its framework, indicating, Adelman explained, which degrees qualify students for what sorts of jobs.

On this note, Adelman recommends that state higher education systems define common core learning outcomes for associate, bachelor’s and master’s degrees, “ratcheting” up the outcomes at each interval. Asked Friday why states should take the lead on this front, Adelman pointed out they hold most of the control in American higher education. (“Keep the feds out!”) Asked about the role of private colleges in this proposed process, he said, “They buy in if they want to.”
Drilling down to a disciplinary level, Adelman next describes efforts to establish a set of common reference points across European colleges through what’s called a “tuning” process. For the United States, he recommends that state authorities organize the various academic departments, in each discipline, to try out a statewide tuning process, which, he writes, is different than standardization and in fact “goes to great lengths to balance academic autonomy with the tools of transparency and comparability.”

“We all know that the flagship state university has more resources and faculty depth than regional institutions, and that one school can have faculty members with very distinct specializations who offer various aspects of a discipline that another school can’t do,” Adelman said Friday, by way of example. “But here if I say that all history majors in the state have to have a program that has time depth to it – that you can’t just major in 1850 to 1900, you’ve got to have a bigger range in history – there’s nothing wrong in everybody buying into that. Everybody can buy into that, whether you’re at the flagship state university or a regional institution. Then how you fill that out, how you execute it in your own program, is your own business.”

“The metaphor I use consistently for this,” he said of the Bologna Process and accountability more generally, “is they’re singing in the same key but not necessarily the same song.”

The report also recommends that the American system of awarding credit be changed to reflect the level of academic challenge of each course (with standardized levels defined in each state). “We give three credits for introduction to sports and three credits for neuro-psychology and pretend those things are equivalent. They’re not,” Adelman said.

It also recommends that American colleges design “degree supplements,” which, attached to the student’s diploma, would offer more extensive information on the content of the degree. Adelman recommends that the supplement include, among other items, the statement of purpose for the degree, a statement of how the student came to the institution (via high school or transfer, for instance), explanations of program requirements, and a title and description of a thesis or final project.

“All we know now is that if someone earned a degree, they earned 120 credits with 40 in the major and a 2.5 minimum GPA. It says nothing about anything else,” Adelman said.

“You learn what accountability means when you look at this loop that 46 countries in Europe have agreed to,” he continued. “And the loop starts with the qualifications frameworks in the degrees, then it goes to tuning in the disciplines, then the third step is the credit system, which is very different than ours, but it’s linked to student learning outcomes.”

“When you get to that diploma supplement at the end, it’s a warranty of everything that’s happened before it. And it’s really student-centered.”

“Learning Accountability from Bologna” is the second in the Institute for Higher Education Policy’s five-part series on Measuring Global Performance. The institute released a longer essay on the Bologna Process in May.

— Elizabeth Redden

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/07/28/bologna.

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