

Bologna Process: What We Should Know

In 1999, 46 European Ministers of Education met together in Bologna, Italy to discuss multi-national higher education issues. The goal of the summit was to see if they could come to an agreement on how to create a zone of mutual trust that would allow for student and faculty mobility among academic institutions thus furthering European integration. The resulting document was dubbed the Bologna Declaration and has become known as the Bologna Process. The agreement outlines some broad principles of reform, including moving toward a three year baccalaureate (cycle one), two year masters and three year doctoral program (cycle two); agreement on quality mechanisms, and mobility requirements for all degree programs. The reforms, as adopted by each participating country, are to be implemented by 2010.

Even though the process has been adopted widely in the European Union, the 2010 goal of full implementation is highly unlikely. One accomplishment of the reform has been the working out of agreed upon student learning outcome statements through a collaborative called the Tuning Model. This process has brought together faculty from various nations to grapple drafting outcome statements that could be adopted by their colleagues in other countries. Key to this achievement is that the statements do not claim to describe 100% of what a student should know. Rather, they give allowance for national and institutional autonomy to determine specifics to learning outcomes.

The Bologna Process is not a perfect course of action; ask any of the participating countries. But they are addressing some of the more pressing global issues within higher education. Much of what is being accomplished through Bologna is already being enjoyed by colleges and universities in the United States. Regional accrediting bodies have created a “zone of mutual trust” ensuring a level of academic quality among US colleges and universities which allows for students to transfer from one institution to another across state lines. As well, programmatic accreditation provides general uniformity of specific academic programs in the US that the Europeans are striving to attain.

With the growing pressure on US colleges and universities to be transparent about institutional learning outcomes, it is advantageous that we pay attention to what is being accomplished through the Bologna Process. US academic institutions do better at outlining student outcomes at the course level than the departmental or degree level. Therefore, European reforms could provide a framework for NAACU to facilitate a productive discussion around the thorny issue of developing agreed upon student outcomes statements.

The Tuning Model of the Bologna Process is a fluid collaborative. The foundation work of the model has produced learning outcome statements for the Short Cycle of Cycle One (US equivalent to the Associate Degree), Cycle One (US Baccalaureate) and Cycle Two (Graduate Studies). The ongoing work of the Tuning Model is to address subject specific learning outcomes and to produce outcome statements for regional, national, and local needs.

What follows are the statements as outlined in Clifford Adelman's paper entitled, *The Bologna Process for U.S. Eyes: Re-learning Higher Education in the Age of Convergence*, April 2009.

General Qualifications for Credentials in the European Higher Education Area: Short Cycle, First Cycle, and Second Cycle

Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education **short cycle** (within the first cycle) are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts;
- have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems;
- can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients; and
- have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.

Qualifications that signify completion of the **first cycle** are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, *whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;*
- can apply their knowledge and understanding *in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;*
- have the ability *to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements (sic) that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;*
- can communicate *information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists and non-specialist audiences; and*
- *have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.*

Qualifications that signify completion of the **second cycle** are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding *that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with Bachelor's level, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context;*
- can apply their knowledge and understanding, *and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study;*
- have the ability *to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements (sic) with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements(sic);*
- can communicate *their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously; and*

- have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study *in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous*.

Notice that the statements follow a basic format of addressing content acquisition in statement one, application of content in statements two and three, communication skills in four and the ability for further studies in the final statement. Subject dependent outcome statements follow a similar pattern. Again, an important factor to remember is that the statements are designed to outline approximately 70% of what a student should know. The remaining 30% is to be determined through the autonomy of the institution which enables it to develop curriculum uniquely according to its mission.

It is also worth noting that the Tuning Model does not dictate *how* these statements will be measured. That too is left to the institution. It is not expected that the US would accept these statements *carte blanche* but possibly engage in a similar academic collaborative that might reach a similar outcome. The process would cause us to think intentionally toward what the ideal graduate would look like regardless of the academic discipline. The statements would leave plenty of room for institutional autonomy while also allowing adaptation for subject specific needs. Key, however, is the production of substantive statements that would provide sufficient transparency for effective measurement and public accountability.

The **Diploma Supplement** is another intriguing product of the Bologna Process. The Supplement is designed to be attached to the academic credential upon graduation. It allows the student to provide narrative around the diploma so that employers can more fully understand the depth and breadth of the degree attained. This electronic file will include the academic transcript, narrative of the degree content and results gained to provide context of the degree experience, statement of the purpose of the credential (technical, practical, theoretical, etc), and an open ended section for additional information such as academic and civic honors, internships, external exams or licenses, language proficiencies, and so forth. The Supplement will have an international standard format and will be utilized by employers throughout Europe.

The United States has been the world leader in setting standards for a quality higher education experience. Globally nations still look to the U.S. for guidance, however other nation leaders are emerging and international collaboration could catapult a block of other nations into determining the future of higher education. It is incumbent upon higher education leaders in the U.S. to examine closely what is happening on the higher education global stage and respond in a responsible and calculated manner. The two achievements of the Bologna process described in this paper are worth our careful examination and response.

Claude Pressnell, November 2009