

Whither Bologna?

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ABSTRACT: As Europe observed in spring 2010 the first decade of the Bologna Process of higher education reform, the 46 participating nations had much to celebrate. Affirming a commitment to a second decade, they could point to substantive advances on several important fronts. But they acknowledged also that the ambitious agenda announced in 1999 had not been accomplished and would require a sustained commitment through a second decade. The progress already made would appear to augur well for eventual success. But emerging incompatibilities among some objectives, a lack of committed resources, distracting political agendas, and the rise of public resistance should prompt doubts. While it is not possible to predict the future of Bologna with any assurance, we can broaden our understanding of both the present momentum of the process and the risks it now confronts.

When I agreed in fall 2008 to write a book on the Bologna Process of higher education reform in Europe, I recognized I would have to anticipate two possibilities. If by 2020 the Bologna Process were to emerge as the most successful reform in the history of higher education, my book should appear prescient for having identified and commended the critical elements. But if the Bologna Process had joined the long ranks of failed reforms, my book should have explained the sources of its failure.

Two years later and nearly nine months after the January 2010 publication of *The Challenge of Bologna: What United States Higher Education Has to Learn from Europe and Why It Matters That We Learn It* (Stylus Publishing) the picture is no clearer. Both the accomplishments of the process and the risks its faces have become more pronounced. Hence a brief stocktaking is in order. The prospects for Bologna may not become clearer, but what is at stake for Europe—and for the world—may be more fully defined.

A Decade of Accomplishment

The Bologna Process has already achieved much. During its first decade, Europe's education ministers agreed to pursue an ambitious agenda. The Bologna Process would lead to "a system of easily readable and comparable degrees" based on two (later three) cycles, the creation of "a system of credits," increased student and staff mobility, the "promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance," the "promotion of the European dimension in higher education," a "focus on lifelong learning," the greater inclusion of institutions and students in decision making, promotion "of the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area," and increased synergy between doctoral studies and the European Research Area. The biennial progress reports that have been presented by the ministers every two years constitute an impressive record.

- Virtually every participating country has now adopted, at least on paper, a standard three-cycle degree system (bachelor's: three years, master's: two years, doctorate: four years) that replaces a mélange of idiosyncratic degree titles, widely dissimilar program durations, and arcane credentials. While some nations have simply divided five-year programs into two components without undertaking any curricular reform, gains in intelligibility with regard to academic programs are clear. But students have expressed concern about the acceptance of the three-year baccalaureate in the marketplace.
- At the European level a rudimentary statement of outcomes associated with each degree level provides an “overarching” qualifications framework. And there is progress towards the development of national frameworks. But the deadline for completion of such frameworks has been set back several times, and the end is not yet in sight. The Tuning Process, while not formally a Bologna initiative, is contributing to this goal through its discussions within disciplines of what is expected of students at each level.
- The creation of a European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is bringing a degree of regularity to the documentation and transfer of academic credits. A common ECTS standard defines an academic year in terms of credits (60) and hours of study (1500-1800) regardless of the program or where it is offered. Further, each graduate now receives a “diploma supplement” that both interprets academic accomplishments to potential employers and graduate institutions and documents engagements and achievements not captured by traditional diplomas. Although there are concerns about the extent to which the supplements are used and understood, the program offers a model already being piloted in the U.S.
- Thanks in large part to pressure from the European Student Union, the education ministers have articulated a “social dimension” for the process. This has been variously defined to include expanded access to higher education for underrepresented populations and the greater diversification of campus cultures. Although there has been little concrete accomplishment to date, this dimension has been identified as a priority for the second decade of the Process.
- Halfway through its first decade, the Bologna Process incorporated also an emphasis on lifelong learning. As a result, there is now within Europe an effort to ensure more consistent recognition of prior learning (formal and informal) and to expand the flexibility of program delivery. Again, however, there is so far relatively little in the way of documented accomplishment.

This is an impressive record in the light of the characteristically ponderous pace of higher education elsewhere. But what remains to be accomplished in the second decade is no less impressive. In addition to making up the shortfalls indicated above with respect to national qualifications frameworks, acceptance of the three-year degree, expanded recognition of the diploma supplement, additional joint degrees, and student and faculty mobility, the Bologna Process faces the challenge of living up to the impressive reports it has generated.

- With the three-cycle degree system now the standard, nations and institutions must do more to align their curricula with European qualifications expectations. A perfunctory disaggregation of existing programs is unlikely to respond either to the overarching qualifications framework that has been articulated within Europe or to the disciplinary standards developed through the Tuning Process.
- An anticipated increase in mobility of students and faculty across national borders has not met expectations, in part because of the greater urgency implicit in three-year baccalaureate programs. A 2010 survey by the European University Association found that only 25% of higher educators believe that the Bologna Process provides “significantly” greater opportunity “for students to move from one faculty or institution to another within a degree cycle” while the remaining respondents believe the influence to be slight. Indeed, 7% of those responding believe the Bologna Process has *discouraged* mobility. If mobility is to increase more than marginally, obstacles must be addressed more effectively. Protocols (visas, work permits, etc.) must be further reformed, qualifications recognition procedures must be expanded, financial incentives must be increased, and (for faculty especially) compensation and pension arrangements that hold participants harmless must be developed.
- If the social dimension of the Bologna Process is to become more than a salutary aspiration, the education ministers must agree on a more fully unified and aggressive approach. Delegating the responsibility for the development of action plans to participating nations has not so far produced much in the way of results.
- If enhanced employability is to be accomplished, there must be more effective communication with potential employers with regard to the three-year baccalaureate, more effective career guidance at the institutional level, and sustained attention to the role of higher education in ensuring and supporting lifelong learning. Similarly, if recipients of the three-year baccalaureate are to enjoy mobility internationally, European higher education must explain and document this degree far more persuasively and effectively to graduate programs in the U.S. and elsewhere.
- Having identified European resurgence as an initial priority, the Bologna Process would now benefit from a broader global perspective. The example of Europe offers much that the rest of the world might follow, but European higher education reform would be well served by greater attentiveness to good practice elsewhere.

This in-a-nutshell view of Bologna to date cannot document all that has been achieved in ten years across 46 countries with regard to nine distinct action lines, but it should be clear that considerable momentum has developed and that the prospects for continued accomplishment are encouraging. However, there are serious caveats that demand attention.

Potholes on This Stretch of Road—And the Next

In *The Challenge of Bologna*, I adopted the homely but vivid metaphor of “potholes” to represent impediments. For while the process remains on the road and continues to move forward, it has had to slow down as potholes have appeared. And other potholes are emerging.

The most vivid, if perhaps not the most significant impediment to further progress was apparent in the student and faculty demonstrations that greeted the education ministers in Vienna in March 2010. Taking to the streets of the Austrian capital, the students attempted to block access to the meeting site. While unsuccessful, they nevertheless made clear their principal objections. The Bologna Process had led and would continue to lead in their view to standardization among institutions and programs, to higher costs for students (and thus a diminished “social dimension” resulting from reduced access), and to a reduction of workforce opportunities. As a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* observed recently, “what started as an attempt to foster internationality and mobility . . . ignited a revolution” (de Pommereau, 2010).

That some of the student objections might more reasonably have been lodged against initiatives unrelated to Bologna—the restructuring of the higher education economics in France, for instance—does not diminish their importance. To the extent that student opinion prompts public negativity, the education ministers, themselves for the most part political appointees, can hardly fail to pay attention.

Even more serious potholes are appearing, however, both internal and external.

Among the internal issues is the lack of a dedicated infrastructure charged with oversight and promotion of the process. The shift of managerial responsibilities every two years from one participating nation to another has not served Bologna badly; the biennial conferences have been well planned and executed and some degree of coordination among the disparate initiatives has been maintained. But an essentially voluntary process depends for its continued vitality on the attention and commitment of all concerned, and the economic downturn continues to draw attention in other directions.

Another internal issue arises from what otherwise might appear as a mark of Bologna’s success: its growth from the 29 nations that signed the 1999 declaration to the 46 nations now participating. New members such as Russia, Turkey, Albania, and Azerbaijan have enriched the process, but the much broader range of political, ideological, cultural, and geographical influences calls into question whether participating nations will ever achieve anything like a comparable approach to the implementation of all action lines. The European Student Union has denounced “a la carte” reform, i.e., the pursuit of some action lines and the neglect of others. Some commentators have argued that not all participating nations may have the “experience, resources or national discussions to fully implement the Bologna reforms at this stage” (Caddick, 2008).

Even within nations inconsistencies appear from one institution to another. Some are implementing meaningful reforms. But in those that appear content with “more cosmetic and superficial implementation” (EUA Trends V, 2007, p. 19), Bologna cognoscenti may be focusing more closely on framing impressive progress reports than on making real progress. And especially unclear is the depth to which the Bologna reforms have had any influence on what happens in the classroom.

Finally, there is the concern that some of Bologna’s priorities may now appear incompatible. There is tension between insistence on the first cycle bachelor’s degree as an appropriate entry-level credential and the emerging priority on encouraging many more students to undertake graduate study. There is also an uneasy balance between national authority, seen as necessary to ensure institutional compliance with many of the Bologna initiatives, and institutional autonomy, seen as necessary to ensure engagement by those most directly concerned: students, faculty, and staff members. And there is a tension between the urgency of the three-year degree and the effort to encourage greater student mobility.

Among the external potholes threatening to swallow up the Bologna *auto blu* two deserve particular attention: funding and competing initiatives.

The problem of finances is widespread. After a decade, most participating nations have invested little in the Bologna Process. Even prior to the recession, when the pace of reform was encouraging, fewer than half of the universities involved had found the means to appoint a coordinator or director to provide oversight for the Bologna reforms. And the economic recession has made matters worse in at least two respects. With less funding to operate as usual, institutions have found little incentive to pursue further reform. And with less funding to allocate to higher education, many nations have begun looking at processes of restructuring that may transfer more of the costs of higher education to students and compromise the traditional relative independence of faculty members.

That takes us to competing initiatives within Europe. There are many—but two examples must suffice. In 2005, at the mid-point of Bologna’s first decade, Germany announced an “excellence initiative” funded by nearly €2 billion in five-year grants to “make Germany a more attractive research location” and to make the nation more “internationally competitive” (Excellence, 2008)—all without any mention of the Bologna Process. And President Nicolas Sarkozy (2009) of France described academic research systems as childish and moribund, denounced French scientists for their lack of productivity, and announced that 2009 would be *the* year of reform in higher education—again without so much as acknowledging Bologna. If the Bologna Process comes to be regarded as a Continental agenda detached from more pressing local priorities or a subordinate element within a broader agenda, the authority of the Process may be compromised, and a proliferation of action plans, initiatives, reports, declarations, and treaties may create a welter more likely to lead to confusion than genuine systemic reform.

A final concern may be seen as both external and internal: the issue of the two cultures, that of higher education itself and that of the political authority within Europe for higher education. Education ministers may be able to agree on a common agenda for reform, with greater comparability among institutions as a shared goal, but that does not mean that the institutions themselves necessarily will buy in to the aspiration. As Lorenz (2006) has observed, it may be highly problematical to entrust to nations protective of treasured traditions and inimitable institutions “the transformation of a great number of very diverse national systems of higher education into *one* competitive European ‘educational market’” (p. 129).

Who would take issue with the broad goals of the Bologna Process? Improved accountability for programs and institutions, more explicit learning objectives, greater mobility prior to and following graduation, more clearly understood credentials—these and the other aims of the process are or should be shared by higher educators and political leaders everywhere. They are certainly well represented among the many disparate reform agendas within the U.S. And in at least a couple of instances the Bologna spirit appears to have inspired specific initiatives. A pilot Tuning Process in three states—Indiana, Minnesota, Utah—has convened representatives of selected disciplines to develop a consensus on learning outcomes within those disciplines. The Lumina Foundation recently released the draft of a statement of degree-level outcomes for consideration nationally by higher education organizations and their leaders. And some political leaders—most notably, Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), have called on higher education to look carefully at the advantages of the three-year degree. In the light of such efforts, an even more compelling example may be found in the concerted, coordinated, and concentrated Bologna *process*. Unprecedented in its scope and sense of urgency, it remains the world’s great hope for dramatic reform in the priorities and pace of higher education.

Yet unfortunately, as things stand now, according to the *Monitor* reporter, this “catalyst for change” has become for many “synonymous with making students pay” (de Pommereau, 2010). It would be tragic if this issue, unrelated (except in a negative sense) to the initiatives of the Bologna Process, should prove its undoing. But if those supporting the Bologna Process find it impossible to retrieve their impressive agenda from the current morass of fiscal challenge, political expediency, competing initiatives, and public misunderstanding, it is difficult to be optimistic about the future.

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