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Update

A Unified European Higher Education Area in 2010

What does it mean for Europe and for U.S. higher education?

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, at the Sorbonne in Paris, the ministers of education of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom put their pens to a declaration that envisioned a unified European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA would replace diverse national university models with a single model, with programs and course credits valid across all of Europe. Now known as the Bologna Process (after the city in which the first planning and evaluation meetings took place, in 1999¹), the plan for an EHEA outlined a three-year European bachelor's degree and a two-year master's. Today, the Bologna Process encompasses 45 countries, includes doctoral programs, and anticipates a working EHEA by 2010.

At the heart of the Bologna Process is the projected introduction by all EHEA member nations of a standardized credit system (the European Credit Transfer System, ECTS) and an academic documentation protocol (the Diploma Supplement). These innovations will make it easier for students to pursue coursework at universities in any member country or countries, even with gaps in enrollment, and for European universities to recognize students' cumulative credits, wherever earned. In all, the process seeks to ensure quality and compatibility in higher education across Europe (see box, Principal Objectives of the Bologna Process).

Principal Objectives of the Bologna Process

- Adoption of a system of clear and comparable European degrees, each with a Diploma Supplement to accompany transcripts and provide institutions and prospective employers with detailed information on foreign coursework.
- Adoption of a system based on three cycles: bachelor's and master's (attainable in five years of full-time study) and now a doctoral program.
- Establishment of the European Credit Transfer System, providing a common method for transferring credit for academic work completed in a foreign institution, to promote student mobility.
- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement, such as onerous visa requirements.
- Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance.
- Promotion of common European patterns in higher education.

Source: Bologna Declaration (1999); Dept. for Education and Skills, UK (2005).

¹ After the 1998 Paris meeting came biannual meetings in Bologna, Italy, 1999; Prague, Czech Republic, 2001; Berlin, Germany, 2003; and Bergen, Norway, 2005. The 2007 meetings will take place in London, and the UK has taken over leadership of the process from mid-2005 to 2007, along with coordination of standards for doctoral programs. For further information, see, respectively, the official Bologna Process Web sites, Ministry of Education and Research, Norway (2005) and Department for Education and Skills, United Kingdom (2005).

The reforms come as a practical step in the face of criticism of European higher education for failing to cope with “massification” (the University of Rome has 180,000 students) and for losing ground vis-à-vis the elite universities of the United States (today, 17 of the world’s top 20 universities are American; Wooldridge 2005).

A KEY TO EUROPEAN COMPETITIVENESS

Many European leaders consider pan-European coordination of higher education systems as essential to promoting the global competitiveness of the European economy. Toward that end, the Bologna reforms will modernize European universities and increase student and labor mobility in Europe. A vital aspect of the reforms is the streamlining of degree programs. Earning a bachelor’s degree can take seven or eight years in Europe. Under Bologna, bachelor’s and master’s programs combined must not exceed five years of full-time study (see, e.g., Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation, Denmark 2005).

Note that the EHEA is a national and ministerial initiative. It began independently of the European Union (EU) countries, and although it now includes the EU, it goes well beyond the EU area. Thus, whereas the EU currently encompasses 25 countries, the Bologna Process includes 45 nations

stretching across Europe and into Asia, along with several organizations that are voting or consultative members (see Figure 1 and legend).

A HESITANT ACCEPTANCE

The development of the EHEA, like that of the EU, has not been seamless. Aside from the myriad practical details of coordination, questions about the political and economic effects of the process and about faculty and staff exclusion from direct participation in it have persisted. A key voice in advancing education workers’ interests in this regard has been Education International (EI), representing 3 million higher education employees worldwide, 650,000 of whom live and work in the area included in the Bologna reforms. (The NEA is a member of EI.) From 1999 onward, through its pan-European Higher Education and Research Standing Committee, EI worked to gain recognition in the Bologna Process. As EI observed (2005b), faculty “are directly responsible for putting into effect the transition to the ‘Bologna’ levels of study.” Finally, in May 2005, the pressure paid off: the Bergen inter-ministerial meeting admitted EI to consultative member status (Bergen Communiqué 2005).

ONGOING CONCERNS

In a recent statement, EI has cautioned that “the European

Figure 1

The European Union and Bologna Process Nations



Some 45 nations are members of Bologna Process. They are Albania, Andorra, Armenia,* Austria, Azerbaijan,* Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia,* Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova,* Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine,* United Kingdom, and “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.”

The European Commission is a voting member. The Council of Europe, ESIB (National Unions of Students in Europe), EUA (European University Association),

EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education), UNESCO-CEPES (European Centre for Higher Education), and Education International (EI) are consultative members.

*Five new member countries, approved at the Bergen conference in May 2005.

Source: Map adapted from <http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/BASIC/Map.htm>. See also http://europa.eu.int/abc/governments/index_en.htm; http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/Norway/041014Fact_Sheet_Bologna-Process.pdf; and <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2005/05/311601.html>.

Note: Map not to scale; all national boundaries and names unofficial.

higher education and research system remains a tempting target...in the international debate on the liberalization of trade in services, and we are determined that *education must remain a public good* and not degenerate into a commodity" (EI 2005a [emphasis in original]). Specific areas of concern follow:

■ **The growing emphasis on corporate-commissioned research.** Some faculty worry that Bologna's emphasis on global competitiveness and jobs will contribute to a "marketization" of European higher education that would impoverish its quality and character. Others fear that Bologna's administrative tasks and emphasis on instruction will take "time and capacity" away from autonomous faculty research. Bologna-sponsored reform of study programs has already increased uncompensated workloads (Gornitzka and Langfeldt 2005, pp. 7, 27).

■ **The need to enhance the involvement of the unions.** Education unions from several countries reported in early 2005 having no or minimal roles in conjunction with government ministries regarding Bologna (Gornitzka and Langfeldt 2005). This appears to be changing in response to the official recognition at Bergen of unions as participants (Monique Fouilhoux,

EI, personal communication, September 21, 2005).

■ **A five-year increase in short-term employment contracts.** Some unions have commented that Bologna has given scant attention to the working conditions of the growing cohort of short-term workers (Gornitzka and Langfeldt 2005, p. 27). EI is participating in a Bologna working group on the social dimensions of the transition and will stress issues such as the portability of social rights and pensions (Monique Fouilhoux, EI, personal communication, September 21, 2005).

■ **The time and cost implications.** Faculty and unions have questioned the ambitious timetable of the education ministries, particularly in countries that require extensive investments and adaptations to meet the Bologna standards. Others have noted the high cost of standardization (Gornitzka and Langfeldt 2005, p. 7).

Despite such reservations, EI (2005a) supports higher education's "genuinely international character" and is committed to participate in Bologna. EI is exerting pressure on behalf of education workers in several ways:

■ **Enhancing faculty mobility.** This includes facilitating visa and work permits and

encouraging EI constituent unions to effect reciprocal memberships.

■ **Supporting faculty autonomy.** This includes freedom in research and instruction, along with freedom from undue administrative burdens; fair working conditions and compensation; and support of young academics to replace "graying" faculty (EI 2005a).

■ **Pressing for adoption by the Bologna member states of the EU Researchers' Charter.** This will help to reduce damaging intra-European competition for faculty (i.e., "brain drain") and to maintain the creative balance between independent research and teaching (see, e.g., EUA 2005, EI 2005a).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

European education employees clearly share a raft of concerns on issues with their U.S. counterparts. This implicitly expands opportunities for consultation and collaboration within EI and between American and European education unions.

At the same time, the Bologna reforms could intensify U.S.–European rivalries. One way is by escalating competition for faculty and research staff. Although the EU countries now have—and



the Bologna signatories may soon have—a Researchers’ Charter to regulate their intramural acquisitions and transfers of staff, they are also looking to recruit talented employees from nonparticipating countries. The 2005 Bergen Communiqué recognized the potentially deleterious effects of such a “foreign policy” and vowed to formulate ways to mitigate those effects over the next two years. The NEA has also suggested some dimensions of the “brain drain” issue, and EI is interested in exploring U.S. – European cooperation (see Hendrickson 2003; Monique Fouilhoux, EI, personal communication, September 21, 2005).

Another aspect of potential competition is in attracting

students. This applies particularly to students from Asia, for whom the market has become highly competitive in the last decade.

The European reform is also likely to enhance student exchanges between Europe and the United States, with mixed implications for the United States. Europeans are about 15 percent of the international enrollment in U.S. higher education (NAS 2005, p. 9; Koh 2002). Most are in U.S. degree programs. In contrast, American students in Europe typically attend the study-abroad programs of U.S. universities. The implementation of English-language degree programs in Europe that are shorter and

have comparatively lower tuitions will make it easier for U.S. students to enroll directly at European universities and to transfer undergraduate and graduate credits back home. This may attract American students, but it may also put pressure on U.S. universities and faculties.

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The Bologna Process could help Europe become an increasingly competitive, knowledge-based economy, capable of more sustainable growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. The success and equitability of that growth may be determined in part on the road to EHEA’s implementation in 2010 and beyond.

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