



Council of Ministers of Education, Canada
Conseil des ministres de l'Éducation (Canada)

European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

The Bologna Process

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Prepared for
The Committee of Postsecondary ADMs (PSADM)
May 2008

By

The CMEC Quality Assurance Subcommittee

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European Higher Education Area (EHEA) The Bologna Process¹

Overview

The Bologna Process represents a commitment by 46 European countries to undertake a series of reforms to achieve greater consistency and portability across their higher education systems without impacting upon their sovereignty in matters related to higher education. A characteristic of the Bologna Process is that main policy goals are agreed upon and then implemented in each participating country. The participating European countries commit to reviewing their systems and structures of higher education in order to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010.²

The EHEA is not intended as a centralized European system of higher education. Rather, it is a 'higher education area' in which sovereign countries have agreed to implement common key features in their educational systems so that student, teacher, researcher and staff mobility, and recognition of qualifications will be greatly enhanced.

Observers from all continents are monitoring with much interest the major changes being implemented in Europe. Countries in Africa, South America, Asia, and North America are analyzing the reform process and trying to determine what influence the Bologna Process will have on their educational systems. Provinces and territories may want to consider ways to analyze how these international changes will impact the Canadian educational systems.

Objectives of The Bologna Process

The main objectives of the process are as follows:

- a) Six initial objectives of the Bologna Declaration (1999)
 - *Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees* — by means of the implementation of the Diploma Supplement.³

¹ With permission. The information in this article is partially inspired by a document prepared by the International Division Strategy and System Performance, Ministry of Education, New Zealand entitled "Bologna Process," November 2006.

² Albania, Andorra, Armenia, **Austria**, Azerbaijan, **Belgium**, Bosnia-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, Montenegro, **Netherlands**, Norway, **Poland**, **Portugal**, **Romania**, Russian Federation, Serbia-Montenegro, **Slovak Republic**, **Slovenia**, **Spain**, **Sweden**, Swiss Confederation, Turkey, Ukraine, **United Kingdom**, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Montenegro was a part of the Bologna Process, as a part of (then) Serbia-Montenegro, until its declaration of independence in June 2006. It was admitted to the Bologna Process at the ministerial conference in London in May 2007 (European Union countries are in bold).

³ Diploma Supplement. See http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/rec_qual/recognition/diploma_en.html and an example at http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/img/dynamic/c1388/type.FileContent.file/DSupplementExamples_en_IE.pdf.

- *Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles (bachelor's and master's)* — initially, it was agreed that the degree structure would be mainly based on a two-cycle model. The first cycle, lasting a minimum of three years, ends in a bachelor-level degree. Master's degrees are the second cycle.
- *Establishment of a system of credits* — such as in the ECTS ⁴ system — many countries did not have a system of study credits and determined their degrees only in years or semesters. The objective of establishing a system of credits was to promote widespread student mobility. The foremost tools for achieving mobility are the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement.
- *Promotion of mobility for students and academic and administrative staff* — obstacles which prevent the effective mobility of students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff will be removed.
- *Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance* with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies — the European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) ⁵ plays a key role in this.
- *Promotion of the European dimension in higher education* — closer international cooperation and networks; language and cultural education.

b) Three (3) objectives added in the Prague Communiqué (2001)

- *Lifelong learning* — is recognized as “an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life.” ⁶
- *Higher education institutions and students* — “the involvement of universities and other higher education institutions and of students in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed.” ⁷

⁴ ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). See

http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/socrates/ects/index_en.html and <http://www.eua.be/index.php?id=61>.

⁵ ENQA has since changed its name to the “European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.”

⁶ Lifelong Learning. http://www.eng.unibo.it/PortaleEn/University/Bologna+Process/FollowUpConferences_htm#2.

⁷ Ibid.

- *Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area in a global setting* — agreement on the importance of enhancing the attractiveness of European higher education to students from non-European Union countries.”⁸

c) One (1) objective added in Berlin (2003)

- *Doctoral studies and the synergy between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area* were added as objectives of the process. The Bologna Process sees research as an integral part of the European Higher Education Area. Higher education ministers considered it necessary to include the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. In doing so, the link between the Bologna Process to create the European Higher Education Area and the European Union’s Lisbon objective to develop a European Research Area (ERA) was strengthened.⁹

Implementation Structure of The Process

At the present time, only the 49 countries party to the European Cultural Convention¹⁰ may become members of the Bologna Process provided they expressly commit to its goals and spell out how they intend to implement it in their own country. All are strongly encouraged to ratify the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Convention).

There is no central government, or parliament, or European entity overseeing the Bologna Process. While the Council of Europe and the European Union are important stakeholders, it is not an EU- or a COE-directed initiative. Ministers responsible for higher education in their respective countries come together every two years to make decisions regarding the EHEA. Between meetings, the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) is mandated to oversee the implementation of the process, develop proposals for policy initiatives, and prepare recommendations to the ministerial meetings. Following the meetings, ministers make official recommendations to their countries, and, if necessary, recommend modifications to their education systems, either through ministerial decrees or new legislation. In no case will the sovereignty of a country in

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Guide to the Bologna Process — The UK HE Europe Unit, p. 36, Action Line 10, January 2005.
<http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/resources/Guide%20to%20the%20Bologna%20Process%20booklet.pdf>.

¹⁰ The purpose of this convention is to develop mutual understanding among the peoples of Europe and reciprocal appreciation of their cultural diversity to safeguard European culture, to promote national contributions to Europe’s common cultural heritage respecting the same fundamental values, and to encourage in particular the study of the languages, history, and civilization of the parties to the convention. The convention contributes to concerted action by encouraging cultural activities of European interest. See: European Cultural Convention, Paris, 19.XII.1954,
<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/018.htm>.

educational matters be questioned. Membership (currently 46 countries) is much wider than the EU (27 countries), and the EU has only partial “competence” over education matters in the Union.

The Bologna Process is nevertheless very important as a means for the European Union’s stated objective to make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.”

Responsibility for implementing the goals of the Bologna Declaration and subsequent ministerial decisions and declarations rests with the signatory countries and their respective national governments, academic institutions, student organizations, and professional associations.

The momentum of the process is maintained through meetings of the European education ministers. Ministers meet every two years to appraise progress toward the EHEA and to determine priorities. The next ministerial meeting will be held in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium on April 28-29, 2009.

Ministerial Meetings — An Overview

1998 Sorbonne Declaration¹¹

Signed by education ministers of France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, this lays the foundation for the Bologna Process by seeking the improvement of external recognition of national higher education systems to facilitate student mobility and employability.

1999 Bologna Declaration¹²

Education ministers from 29 European countries sign the Bologna Declaration, which outlines six objectives for the development of a coherent and cohesive EHEA by 2010.

2001 Prague Communiqué¹³

Ministers reaffirm their commitment to establishing the EHEA by 2010 and add three objectives.

The European Students’ Union (ESU),¹⁴ the European University Associations (EUA),¹⁵ the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE),¹⁶ and the

¹¹ Sorbonne Declaration. http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00_Main_doc/980525SORBONNE_DECLARATION.PDF.

¹² Bologna Declaration. http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00_Main_doc/990719BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.PDF.

¹³ Prague Communiqué. http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00_Main_doc/010519PRAGUE_COMMUNIQUE.PDF.

¹⁴ ESIB — The European Students’ Union in Europe. <http://www.esib.org/>.

¹⁵ EUA — European University Associations. <http://www.eua.be/>.

Council of Europe are now formal participants in the process. Thirty-three countries are now signatories to Bologna.

2003 Berlin Communiqué¹⁷

Ministers seek to speed up the realization of the EHEA by undertaking an assessment (“stocktaking”) by 2005 of their progress in implementing key policy goals.

Quality assurance was formally put on the agenda, and the European Association for Quality Assurance for Higher Education (ENQA)¹⁸ was asked by the ministers to present a quality assurance proposal at the Bergen meeting in Norway. Member states were “encouraged to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also [undertook] to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.”¹⁹ Forty countries are now members in the process, and the criteria for membership were expanded from eligibility for specified EU programs to countries being part to the European Cultural Convention combined with a clear commitment to the process. Russia, which would not have been eligible under the previous criteria, was among the seven countries that joined the process in Berlin.

2005 Bergen Communiqué²⁰

Membership extended from 40 countries to 45. Ministers adopted an overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA. They committed to begin adopting national frameworks for qualifications by 2007 and completing the process by 2010. The framework will have three degree cycles with generic descriptors²¹ for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competencies and credit ranges for qualifications within the first and second cycles. At this point, only Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom have national qualifications frameworks in place. They received the first stocktaking report, and they adopted European quality assurance standards. For the first time, the social dimensions of higher education, as well as the Bologna Process in its global context (“external dimension”), were emphasized in the communiqué.

2007 London Meeting²²

The most recent ministerial meeting was held in London on May 17-18, 2007. A 46th country, Montenegro was welcomed as a member to the process. The ministers reaffirmed their determination to seeing the process continue until its full implementation

¹⁶ EURASHE — European Association of Institutions in Higher Education.

<http://www.eurashe.eu/RunScript.asp?p=ASP/Pg0.asp>.

¹⁷ Berlin Communiqué. <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf>.

¹⁸ ENQA — European Association for Quality Assurance for Higher Education. <http://www.enqa.eu/>.

¹⁹ Berlin Communiqué. <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf>.

²⁰ Bergen Communiqué. http://www.cicic.ca/docs/bologna/Bergen_Communique.en.pdf.

²¹ Dublin Descriptors. <http://www.jointquality.nl/content/descriptors/CompletesetDublinDescriptors.doc>.

²² London Communiqué.

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/londonbologna/uploads/documents/LondonCommuniquefinalwithLondonlogo.pdf>.

in 2010 by addressing important issues such as the recognition of higher education qualifications, prior learning, and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. They emphasized the importance of putting in place qualifications frameworks in each country and of pursuing the implementation of a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies. Great emphasis was also put on the social dimension of higher education and the need to promote the European Higher Education Area in a global context.

2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Meeting

The next ministerial conference will be hosted by the BENELUX countries at the universities of Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve on April 28-29, 2009.

The Year 2010

Much remains to be done to achieve the goals of Bologna in all participating countries by 2010. While there is a strong political will to achieve the goals set out in the Bologna Process, there are challenges ahead for many countries in implementing the reforms. Even countries that are advanced in formal changes to their higher education structures will need to work hard to ensure that higher education institutions implement the changes through appropriate curriculum reform.

There is also a major communication exercise needed to convince the European community, particularly employers, to accept the new degree structures. The 2005 stock-taking exercise revealed that the recognition of the new bachelor qualification had been slow in some countries, particularly by some areas of the public service, as well as in some countries with a tradition of studies that lasted longer before obtaining a first degree.

Bologna beyond Europe

Despite variable progress in implementation, the Bologna Process has implications for higher education globally. Countries from various continents are considering their response to Bologna. Australia is leading an attempt to establish an Asia-Pacific process similar to the Bologna Process: “Engaging our key regional partners in dialogue on the Bologna Process provides another important strand on which to develop Australia’s bilateral education relationships.”²³ This Australian initiative has become known as the Brisbane Communiqué.²⁴ New Zealand is also interested in Bologna. Following a February 2007 meeting in Wellington, it put out an information advisory in which it states that “The Ministry of Education and the New Zealand tertiary education sector are together progressing ways in which New Zealand can better align with the Bologna Process to support student and academic staff mobility.”²⁵ Latin American and African countries have expressed interest in emulating the Bologna Process. Observer status was

²³ Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Training *The Bologna Process and Australia: Next Step*. April 2006. p. 8.

²⁴ Brisbane Communiqué, Asia-Pacific Education Ministers’ Meeting. April 2006.

²⁵ Information advisory — New Zealand keenly interested in Bologna. February 2007. p. 1.

granted to some at ministerial meetings. China has shown interest in cementing its educational links with a number of European countries. Canada, through the Minister of Foreign Affairs obtained observer status at the 2007 London meeting. A representative from HRSDC attended the meeting. The National Coordinator of the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) also participated in his then capacity as President of the European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC).

The Bologna Process and Canada

While the impact of the Bologna Process on the Canadian higher education landscape has been limited to date, it is quite likely to become the yardstick against which other higher education systems will be compared internationally. The issue of comparison benchmarks will only grow in importance with the internationalization of student recruitment and increased labour force mobility.

In terms of standardization, the European countries party to the Bologna Process had much more diverse higher education systems at the outset than are found in Canada, despite the high degree of decentralization of higher education in this country. As the Bologna Process progresses, the gap is narrowing. In parallel, Canadian higher education systems have also become more diverse over the last decade, with the development of applied degrees granted by colleges and the entry on the degree-granting scene of private (some for profit) organizations, which were assessed through differing standards from one jurisdiction to the other. While these recent changes are raising new questions as to the exact comparability of various credentials, one still finds significant similarities across credentials granted in Canada. Nonetheless, this enhanced diversity is creating challenges for the credibility of Canadian higher education abroad.

The recent ministerial statement defining a pan-Canadian degree qualifications framework and assessment standards for new degree programs and new degree providers is a step toward addressing these challenges. The statement aims to provide common descriptors of degrees granted in the country and defines common assessment standards of new degrees and new degree providers, paralleling in some ways the Bologna Process. The statement, however, is very different from the Bologna Process in at least one way. It describes standards currently attained, while the Bologna Process presents objectives to achieve. The pan-Canadian ministerial statement therefore reflects current commonalities across Canadian jurisdictions, while the Bologna Process defines the common standards that will eventually be met, to varying degrees at least in the shorter term, by participating European jurisdictions. Furthermore, the standards identified by the Bologna Process share some elements of comparability with the pan-Canadian standards now documented. The greatest benefits resulting from these exercises are new, enhanced tools to compare credentials and enhanced comparability across the board, as the tools use similar descriptors. In Canada, the application of the Degree Qualifications Framework by the different jurisdictions, either through direct implementation (Alberta) or through the further development of the pan-Canadian framework to reflect the local context (Ontario, Maritimes) is further evidence of this.

Bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctorates are now being offered in practically all the European countries. Therefore, the European structure will be easier to grasp and monitor (once fully implemented) and more easily comparable to the Canadian structure. However, some questions remain to be answered. European bachelor's degrees are mostly three years in duration before one can be admitted to a master's program. What impact will these changes have on the Canadian bachelor's degree? Would it mean that a student with a European three-year degree who comes to study at the master's level in a given province or territory will be asked to do an extra year of study before pursuing the master's degree? Would it mean that Canadian students going to Europe would automatically be enrolled in the second year of a two-year master's degree if that student has a four-year honours' degree? Perhaps more important, the issue will be the diversity of outcomes from one country to the next, as the preparation prior to entering university, and, at least in the short term, the actual implementation of the standards identified through the Bologna Process will undoubtedly vary from country to country.

An ongoing monitoring of the evolution of the Bologna Process and its impact in Europe, here in Canada, and elsewhere is clearly desirable, as a number of questions will only be answered through time. Other regions of the world (Africa, Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand) are currently monitoring the evolution of the Bologna Process. The provinces and territories may want to consider monitoring on a go-forward basis the evolution of the Bologna Process. At a minimum, an understanding of the changes occurring in the European higher education systems would undoubtedly be beneficial and would probably facilitate exchanges (for students, faculty, researchers, and governments alike) on a greater scale between the universities of the 46 European countries that are members of the Bologna Process and the 13 Canadian jurisdictions. It could facilitate movement of students, professors, and researchers between universities and would provide opportunities for other forms of engagement between the provinces and territories and European countries.

Conclusion

Bologna is an exercise in progress. It is a non-binding process. Many countries are in their initial implementation stages. Each country implements Bologna within its own legislative processes. Some have been members since 1999; others became members in 2005 and one in 2007. Will all the countries be able to implement the decisions made by the ministers during their biannual meetings in time for 2010? No matter what the results will be in 2010, Bologna is a process that is worth monitoring carefully, considering the vast changes that have already occurred as a result.

This European process has captured the imagination of regions and countries worldwide. It is indeed a fascinating exercise that merits being taken very seriously. While this process responds primarily to the internal economic needs of the greater Europe, we should also be aware that there is an external dimension associated with this exercise.