By Jeannine E. Bell and Robert A. Watkins

Strategies in Dealing With the Bologna Process

AS 2010 BEGINS TO DRAW EVER NEARER, European and U.S. educators find themselves united in their concern about a single topic: the European Higher Education Area/EHEA, known almost universally as the Bologna Process. The concern on both sides of the Atlantic is over the same topic, but from differing perspectives. Europeans, naturally, are caught up in attempting to make the agreement work in their individual countries while international educators in the United States frantically ask themselves and others around them, "What are we going to do about Bologna?"

Adapting to the Changes

What is really meant by this question, of course, is "What is *my* institution going to do with the changes in European education wrought by Bologna?" The question ultimately on the minds of the concerned educators over here essentially boils down to one: "How are we going to handle the three year degree problem?" Will U.S. institutions of higher education craft their policies to address only the new European Bologna degrees, or will this issue lead to a more global assessment of three year degrees around the world?

First, we should examine the basic components of the Process and how those may effect U.S. colleges and universities. We will then focus on the aspects most likely to present challenges to current practices, and finally, investigate ways to address those aspects and strategies that might be employed to address the challenges emerging from the Bologna Process.

A brief recapitulation of the elements agreed to by the original 29 signatory countries (now grown to 45) is in order. In 1999, in Bologna, Italy, the signatory countries of Europe agreed to four basic items designed to enhance student mobility across the European educational landscape:

Editors' Note: This article introduces some key topics related to the Bologna Process and the potential affects of its implementation to date on U.S. institutions. In future issues, International Educator *will report additional developments regarding the Bologna Process.*

IMAGES.COM

1. The introduction of a new three-cycle degree structure that would replace the traditional degrees extant in the various countries. These would consist of a first university degree which would then lead to the second, higher degree. The first had to be *at least* three years in length (notice that it was *not* mandated that the first degree actually be three years long) and the subsequent degree would not only enhance the skills learned in the first degree but also prepare the student for the third cycle which would represent the capstone degree of the system and a high level of mastery of the subject field.
2. A system of credits would be adopted to demonstrate progress toward the new degrees and add definition to the courses in terms of weight and value of the individual courses comprising the degrees. The pre-existing ECTS or European Credit Transfer System was the credit system adopted.

3. A uniform and consistent method of rendering the degrees and credits was formulated and dubbed the Diploma Supplement. In its idealized form, the Diploma Supplement was to contain not only the degree and credit information but also a description of the country's educational system, in English and the national language.

4. Finally, a system of quality assurance or accreditation was to be introduced that would be at the institutional, national, and European level.

The new system would be fully implemented by 2010, though some elements were to be in place at the mid-point (in 2005). The signatory countries would then meet every two years after that inaugural meeting in 1999 to assess progress and further articulate the elements upon which the group had agreed.

Because the approach to full implementation varies widely among the signatory countries, and the list of sending countries among the applicant pools of U.S. colleges and universities does not generally include Bologna signatory nations among the top ten, even now (mid-year 2006), over half way to full implementation, international admissions officers have not been inundated with the documentary fall-out from Bologna. Indeed, the trickle has been low enough that higher education institutions in the United States have been able to spend some time attempting to research, assess, consult, and discuss at length the challenges to U.S. college admission resulting from the Bologna process.

Fortunately, some of the features of the EHEA changes do not create difficulties at all. The introduction of the Diploma Supplement is widely seen in the United States as a welcome development. Given the wide disparity of documents associated with European universities (from the German Seminar Scheine to the French Releve de Notes) a uniform system of rendering courses taken and grades received is of inestimable value to U.S. international admissions officers and credentials evaluators. The systematic use by numerous countries of a single credit system, the European Credit Transfer System/ECTS also promises greater ease of evaluation, award of transfer credit at the undergraduate level, and calculation of grade point averages that reflect the true weight of an individual course. Now, the credentials analyst must transpose the ECTS credits to U.S. semester or quarter credits but this exercise is much easier when the annual or semester credit amount is a clearly understood figure. As for accreditation, this aspect is so far in the very early stages and the effect has not yet been felt across the Atlantic as has been the case with the Diploma Supplement, ECTS credits, or the new degrees.

Dealing with the New Credentials

It is the new degree structure, therefore, that poses the most challenge to U.S. international admissions and credential evaluators. Undoubtedly, the concept of a clear two-tiered (later, when doctoral degrees are more fully integrated, three-tiered) degree structure with one degree leading to another, higher degree predicated on an accumulation of credits and clearly displayed on a standard document should make the U.S. Admissions professional stand up and cheer. The problem, however, is that the majority of the Bologna signatory countries adopted the two cycle model of a three-year first degree (frequently referred to as 'bachelor') followed by a two-year second or higher degree (usually called 'master'). While the agreement did not specify a name for the proposed new degrees, most of the signatory countries have opted for the terms 'bachelor' and 'master' to describe the Bologna degrees.

And what, the Europeans ask, is the problem with such a model? The problem is that the vast majority (though certainly by no means all!) of U.S. admissions officers and credentials analysts learned "the trade" using the quantitative model of educational system comparison (pejoratively referred to as "counting years"). Most major university graduate schools (or the admissions offices that support them) require an overseas degree to be four years in duration before that degree-holder is allowed to be admitted to graduate study. The three-year first degree is acceptable only when it is preceded by a 13-year primary/secondary

ADVERTISER'S Index

Due to the significant drop in international applications to U.S. schools since 2002, graduate deans, and most particularly graduate business deans, have entered into the discussion of what constitutes sufficient academic preparation for graduate study.

system of education (the British model being the most clear cut example of this). When the prior system is 12 years, as it is here in the United States, then a three-year degree from abroad (licence from France, or the three-year bachelor's from India) is not considered sufficiently comparable.

Of course, the quantitative approach fails to provide the opportunity to examine more broadly the questions of individual readiness to do graduate work or the ancillary question of what is missing from the three-year degree that makes it insufficient. General education is done at upper secondary level in European style systems and the concept of electives or additional breadth of course requirements (humanities courses for engineers and computer scientists or math/science for the history and government majors) is not embraced. Instead, the subject-specific three-year degree is steeped in major courses to an extent simply not allowed in U.S. baccalauareate programs but that leads the holder to be exceedingly qualified to study *that* subject in graduate school.

Because of Bologna, these sorts of issues are finally beginning to be addressed by International Credential Evaluation professionals. More importantly, the issues are being examined by those outside the small field of international credentials analysts. Due to the significant drop in international applications to U.S. schools since 2002, graduate deans, and most particularly graduate business deans, have entered into the discussion of what constitutes sufficient academic preparation for graduate study. Thus, economics intrudes where heretofore academic content, peer institution practice comparisons, and professional practitioner dialogues formally held sway. This economic intrusion may vary widely as well from school to school within the United States, as the percentage of students coming from the EHEA can range from 10 to 40 percent of the institution's international student population (M. Schatzman, *IIE Networker,* spring 2005, p. 27).

In some instances, institutions simply have made the easy "all or nothing" decision. Those institutions that have always required a four-year bachelor's degree preceded by 12 years (or even less) of primary/secondary study may well continue that policy regardless of what other institutions might do. These are often public, especially large public, institutions. Private institutions, where numbers and recruitment are frequent topics of strategic planning, may prefer to embrace the three-year degrees. Some may choose to alter policy only for Bologna signatory countries, while many more appear ready to widen the Bologna issue to address acceptance of three-year degrees from all over the world.

A Snapshot of Some Current Practices

The institutions opting for the all or nothing approach appear, at the moment, to be few in number. Many more institutions either have no clear policy as yet or are still studying the issue. To gain a somewhat clearer picture of the state of affairs at some of the leading U.S. universities, the authors communicated with a few (16) member institutions of the Association of American Universities. We queried them about current acceptance of three-year degrees and preparation for addressing three-year degrees from member countries of the Bologna Process, especially in the case where three-year degrees weren't routinely accepted for graduate admission in systems that ended secondary schooling after 12 years.

Several of these institutions had not yet resolved how they would address three-year degrees from Bologna Process countries. On those campuses there was an ongoing dialogue to gather information and determine how best to address the issue. The involvement commonly included discussions with a wide range of on-campus players such as: administrators and staff within the international office, administrators in the graduate school, faculty in the graduate departments, administrators in the graduate departments, deans, campus administrators, such as the chancellor, vice-chancellor, provost, vice-provost, etc. Additionally, other agencies such as independent credential evaluation agencies, the Council of Graduate Schools, and national professional associations, were being consulted by some institutions.

For schools that were considering the new EHEA three-year degrees, a wide variety of criteria were being examined—from number of years to analysis of curriculum to individual faculty's personal experience with specific schools, and more. Our impression was that, of these criteria, the two that seemed to have widest acceptance were analysis of curriculum and graduate admission committee members' assessment of admissibility. Of course, this is based on a very limited sample, using a limited number of criteria, so the results cannot be considered dispositive of the prevailing methods being employed at the majority of U.S. institutions. Additionally, to state that these criteria are the only ones that should be used would be a disservice to the great diversity among the U.S. institutions involved in this effort, and to the complexity of the Bologna Process itself.

We also inquired of the schools if acceptance of the three-year degrees offered through the Bologna Process would transfer to acceptance of other three-year degrees that might not have been previously accepted (e.g., India, Australia), but no consensus could be seen.

Of course, without a large scale study it is not possible to draw general conclusions on the current state of preparations at U.S. institutions. But the results of this brief in-

quiry suggest that a great deal of thought and effort is in progress in institutions of higher education in the United States with regard to the Bologna Process. Additional anecdotal evidence also suggests this. Admissions officers and institutional credential evaluators at these schools are trying to become involved at many different levels, within their university as well as outside of their university. Several noted that they have already given presentations to campus administrators.

From our communication with these schools we learned that some institutions are in the process of conducting in-depth research on the comparability of the new degrees in the Bologna countries with the U.S. bachelor degree, and how best to fit them into their current processes. Some institutions have established a policy about how to deal with the new degrees while others are in the beginning stages of establishing a process, and some are just starting to look at how to establish a policy.

Practical Suggestions

Several of the schools had some eminently practical approaches to how to accept the new degrees. For those schools that did not commonly accept three-year degrees, some current solutions to processing them were:

- Use appeal processes that were already in place for graduate admission. This could include provisional admission or dean's review;
- Use the experience of existing relationships, such as exchange programs. Schools could consider tracking the record of known programs that currently accept three-year degrees for the exchange program, and extend this acceptance to three-year bachelor degrees created through the Bologna process;
- Analyze the curriculum of the new programs and make a determination based on this;
- Accept for admission to departments that are in the same field (e.g., history to history, French to French, physics to physics, etc.);
- Accept three-year bachelor degrees as adequate preparation for some master's degrees, but not directly into an academic Ph.D. program;
- Require some prerequisites; and
- Have each department decide individually about whether or not to accept the shorter degrees.

At The University of Texas at Austin, with a large international population, particularly at the graduate level, the issue is still being studied. There is definitely a school of thought that prefers the approach of leaving the option to the various graduate departments who have the final admission decision responsibility in any case. This approach would keep the Graduate and International Admissions Center (the graduate application clearinghouse and processing center for The University) from routinely rejecting applicants with three year degrees from abroad. This view may well prevail but it will be a very modified form of the open-armed embrace of the three year degree practiced elsewhere. In all likelihood, those three-year degrees accepted will be only to those departments willing to accept them *and* must be the first degree designed to lead to graduate admission in the country of origin. Thus, the three-year ordinary degree from Ontario and the three-year ordinary degree from Australia would not be deemed acceptable as only the four-year honours degree leads to graduate admission in those two locales.

Other institutions may choose even more modified approaches such as some type of master's qualifying year or bridge program. These may take many forms and differ as widely as the schools that might employ them. Examples could be a requirement of 30 hours of general elective credit at upper division level or the opposite, more upper division major courses not already taken by the degree holder. Perhaps a more carefully crafted qualifying year would have courses from all over the spectrum and be based on the individual's needs (more English composition, speech, computer programming, research methodology courses, etc.). The bridge program may include immediate graduate admission but with pre-requisites (the common model followed by most graduate business schools when admitting non-BBAs).

If You Haven't Started, Do So Now

Whatever the model followed, it is becoming increasingly clear as the mid-way point toward full implementation recedes further in the past that U.S. institutions need to begin fashioning some type of response to the changes in European higher education occasioned by the Bologna Process. Institutions must continue to discuss the issue and examine various models already in place or in the process of formulation. NAFSA: Association of International Educators remains a constant source of information and ideas through its Bologna Task Force, Bologna Network Web site, conference sessions at both regional and national level, and a series of seminars focusing on specific aspects of the process and the effect on U.S. institutions projected for the coming year.

JEANNINE E. BELL is senior assistant director in the Office of Admissions at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Jeanie has been active at the state, regional and national level of NAFSA for nearly 20 years.

ROBERT A. WATKINS is assistant director in the Graduate and International Admissions Center of The University of Texas at Austin where he has been in involved in international admissions for nearly 30 years. For eight years he was the representative on the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials (1992-2000), and is currently the Network Manager for the Bologna Network in NAFSA's Recruitment, Admissions and Preparation (RAP)

Bologna Online

NAFSA has developed a special-interest network for members on the Bolonga Process. Visit **http://www.nafsa.org/bologna** to access tools and learn a bout the latest country-to-country information.