

## Wake-Up Call for American Higher Ed

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The “Bologna Process,” under which Europe’s higher education systems are trying to “harmonize” their colleges and universities, has for years now been attracting the attention of some American higher education leaders. Those involved in, for example, the admission of graduate students from outside the United States have considered how to consider applications from European nations under the new system.

But the latest jeremiad from Clifford Adelman — known for his ahead-of-the-curve and politically challenging analyses of higher ed — argues that all of higher education in the United States needs to start paying attention to Bologna and to adopting some of its features.

Specifically, Adelman cites evidence that the European countries’ efforts to define what degrees and credits mean are already being embraced not only in Europe, but in the rest of the world. If American colleges don’t get involved, they risk finding that the entire world defines some of the key features of higher education in different ways, and American higher ed risks being passed by.

Adelman argues that Bologna may push colleges much further toward defining learning outcomes than the Spellings Commission ever tried. While the education secretary’s panel urged colleges to adopt systems to measure outcomes, the emphasis of Bologna — both in defining degrees and credits — is focused on specific outcomes. A bachelor’s degree in engineering should mean that a graduate possesses specific skills X, Y and Z, and so forth.

The vision set out in “The Bologna Club: What U.S. Higher Education Can Learn From European Reconstruction,” is sure to be controversial. As Adelman explains it, the European model for making higher education harmonized should lead to similar efforts in the United States, with states taking the place of countries, and pushing colleges for agreements on what a bachelor’s degree truly represents in various fields. In plenty of states, where flagships, regional publics, community colleges and private institutions compete for students and funds — with a range of philosophies — that would appear easier said than done. But it is worth noting that Adelman — who spent years at the Education Department before joining the Institute for Higher Education Policy — has a track record of putting issues in play. The institute issued the report, which was supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education.

In an interview Tuesday, Adelman discussed several parts of Bologna that he believes pose particular challenges for American higher education. In terms of degrees, the European system is moving toward the use of “qualifications frameworks” across types of institutions and disciplines.

“It’s not a wish list of things, like ‘graduates will have critical thinking skills,’ but a warranty statement — it means that if you can’t do those things, you aren’t getting a degree,” he said. And there is agreement within countries on degrees and standards,

even across research universities and polytechnics, he said. There is also a clear progression of degrees, from the equivalent of an associate degree up through a doctorate. While there is a “pan-European qualification system,” individual countries are permitted some customization. From country to country, “they are singing in the same key, but not necessarily the same tune,” Adelman said.

Over time, Adelman said, the various countries are likely to become more closely aligned as certain nations’ specific definitions for various programs attract more students or employers seeking to hire graduates.

With regard to academic credits, Adelman said that the big change being pushed in Europe is a shift from defining credits based on student contact hours with professors (the American way) to one in which the difficulty of a course is measured and defined, based on student work — in and out of class — and the rigor of instruction. “In the United States, we give three credits for intro to sports and three credits for econometrics,” he said. In the new European system, the latter course might be worth eight credits.

Of course the obvious question is why states in the U.S. would seek to undertake a similar effort. “This will be the dominant world paradigm by 2025,” Adelman said. “We can sit here and behave the same way, and if we want to be isolated and drift away from world credentialing, that’s fine,” he said. But in an increasingly international labor market, that will hurt both students and institutions, he added.

Adelman’s report stresses that in many areas, the European emphasis on learning outcomes has led to positive policy changes that deal directly with problems facing institutions in the United States as well. For example, he said that government and institutional policy about part-time students is seriously flawed in the United States. “We either don’t count them at all or mix them in with everyone else,” Adelman said, and lawmakers blast community colleges when many of their part-time students take a while to graduate or earn a certificate.

The European emphasis on specific skills for a degree makes much more sense, he said. If a part-timer takes longer to learn, so what? The degree is still the same. And an emphasis on actual learning, he said, will lead to creative ideas. For example, he noted a special category of student in Sweden, in which only one course at a time is taken. It takes longer the graduate, but students learn and complete the program. “It’s about student learning,” Adelman said. “If all we focus on is long it takes someone to do something, you will get shallow learning out of it.”

— *Scott Jaschik*