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**Policy Memo:
The Bologna Process for a European Higher Education Area:
Implications for Canada?**

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What is the Bologna Process?

Below the North American radar screen an unusual and surprising adventure in coordinated policy making among countries in the area of Higher Education, has been taking place in the last eight years. Its “pre-origins” were in the efforts of the European Commission since the mid 1970s to foster educational mobility, something which could be connected to the EU’s mandates for an internal market and free movement of labor. The general area of education was the domain of the member states, but the Commission cautiously tried to push the envelope, often checked in its efforts. Its most visible success was the Socrates - Erasmus program, begun in 1987 and which, by 2000 had subsidized a million students to study for a term or two in the university of another member state. Incidental to this but necessary for it was the creation of a “credit” system so that the time spent abroad could be used towards the student’s home country degree, even though the universities and university systems were extremely heterogeneous. ECTS, the European Credit Transfer System, now is extensively used, not only in the enlarged EU but, at least for exchange credits for example, by universities here and elsewhere. Erasmus was a huge success but exposed how cumbersome exchange was, how non-transparent the systems were in their contents and modes of assessment. They were “unreadable” to each other, never mind to non-Europeans.

In 1998 the then Minister of Education in **France** called his colleagues in Germany and Italy (and later, England) to a celebration of the 800th birthday of the Sorbonne, and to the surprise of the assembled Rectors, the four produced a “Joint declaration on harmonization of the architecture of the European higher education system”, calling for progressive convergence of the framework of degrees and cycles to facilitate the recognition of qualifications, mobility among the systems and greater international recognition. A year later, **1999 at Bologna**, 29 countries had signed on to a call for two cycles (bachelors, masters), breaking up the lengthy (5year) initial degrees of several of the central countries, degrees which frequently took much longer than five years, had high drop-out rates, and whose graduates often could not find jobs. The ECTS system was advocated not only for credit transfer but for “credit accumulation”. There was also a commitment to devise a system to make academic qualifications more “readable”, (transparent) which resulted in a “Diploma Supplement” (which describes the university system, the particular program, and then provides the assessment of the work (grades); it has the elements of a North American calendar excerpt plus transcript.

(Later on, to the “3+2” model (which has wiggle room for “4+1”) was added agreement on a doctorate of a minimum of 3 years.) It was also agreed that for there to be the “trust” among the universities required for “recognition” of each other’s credits and degrees, European cooperation in “quality assurance” would be necessary. A “European dimension” in higher education was also to be promoted.

At this point the process was (on the surface) explicitly and exclusively inter-ministerial, inter-governmental. The group agreed to convene biannual meetings of Education Ministers, with the host country both chairing and providing the secretariat. Later a “Bologna Follow-up Group” from among the attending countries, organized work between sessions, organized numerous workshops, and prepared for the next meeting. Three biannual meetings followed, the last in Bergen in 2005 and the next to be in London in 2007. **By 2005, forty-five** countries had signed up to the “Bologna Process”.

The goal was **mobility** between programs (the breaking down or at least erosion of so-called “binary” HE systems), between universities ---One could graduate from the first cycle and take the second elsewhere.—and between countries ; that elsewhere might be across a border. The aim was to create a “**European Higher Education Area**” (by implication, on analogy to the internal market, without barriers).

At the **2001** Ministerial meeting in Prague, the European Commission became a full member and other international organizations which had done enormous work in this area (UNESCO, Council of Europe, OECD) as well as several trans-European non-governmental organizations in the education area, became Observers. Promotion of “**lifelong learning**” was added to the process and of the “**attractiveness**” of the EHEA. In **2003** in Berlin, the doctoral third cycle, and relationship of EHEA to the “European Research Area”, (ERA) was specified. A “**European framework of reference for qualifications**” encompassing vocational education and training as well as higher education, and making Bologna now part of the whole Lisbon Agenda, (of which more below) was added to the agenda.

The **2005** meeting in Bergen was a “**mid-term stocktaking**”, and **now quality assurance was placed first** in the “action lines”. National frameworks of qualifications by 2010 were aimed at. The major items for **2007** are: **quality assurance, implementation**, and the “**external dimension**”, i.e. relations with other world regions.

The ambitious agenda items, with their optimistic 2010 target date, should not obscure the fact that, according to the April 2005 “National Trends in the Bologna Process” report, the “two cycle” system has been adopted “almost everywhere in Europe”, the binary systems have been blurred, research training is included in doctoral programs in half the countries (part of the curricular change intended to be part of the changes in the degree “cycles”), the ECTS is increasingly used not only for credit transfer but for credit accumulation, the Diploma Supplement is being issued in “a majority” of countries, and quality assurance is coordinated in “the great majority of countries” in an agency independent of the education ministry. We know implementation is uneven

within as well as among countries , not complete across Europe, and likely to take until much later than 2010. Nevertheless by any measure, such progress within seven years is astonishing!

Why so rapid a spread? Why so sustained and elaborated a development?

In another paper I have asked two questions and answered with two arguments:

1. What accounts for the surprisingly swift spread of the Bologna standards? 2. What sustained this rapid, and deepening process? I argued that the speed was explained by what I called a “**coordination imperative**”. Analytically, coordination (as opposed to cooperation) involves indifference to the content of the decision or standard, but desire to be on the side of a particular or dominant party. (Game theorists illustrate the coordination *aspect* of any particular concrete case, with the “Battle of the Sexes”.) It is the coordination *dimension* of our empirical case, that I would highlight. Once the “big four” countries agreed on something, this was like a ‘critical mass’ (to mix metaphors); there were powerful incentives for others to follow (which I have reviewed elsewhere)* And “3+2” acted as a “focal point”.

I believe that what sustained the process, once launched, was: first and foremost, an **alliance** between the European Commission and University Administrators, through the European Universities Association, formed in 2001 from the merger of the Association of European Universities and the European Union Rectors’ Conferences. EUA does both research and policy.

The early involvement of the other I.Os (important as part of the educational “epistemic community”), the inclusion of ESIB, the organization of national student unions at the European level, all helped, and the European Commission’s own initiatives enhanced the efforts*

Not inconsequentially, there was **the absence in the process of a key interest, professors and other academic staff**. They lacked organization at the European level; there is no equivalent to CAUT , the Canadian Association of University Teachers, while EUA is a rough equivalent of AUCC, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

My argument is that the EU-University administrators alliance, and the absence of a voice for University professors as such, were key elements in the rapid elaboration and spread of the Bologna measures.

The Lisbonization of Bologna

Just two years after the Sorbonne Declaration, a meeting of the European Council (Prime Ministers/Presidents of the EU Member States) in **2000 at Lisbon** member states committed themselves to what became known as the “Lisbon Agenda” whose “strategic goal” is “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs, and greater

social cohesion” ---by 2010!! The background, of course, was worry about Europe’s low growth/high unemployment economies, particularly in relation to the US and Japan, (later also to Asia, especially China and India).

The **Lisbon Agenda** emphasized the role of knowledge in its diagnosis of the slowed economies of Europe. In its OECD/Lisbon supply side diagnosis the economic problems were seen as “structural”, exacerbated by, but not caused by, the radically intensified global trade and investment competition. The new requirements were economic “restructuring” and increased “flexibility”. The universal nostrums were: ‘education and training’, investing in ‘human capital’, ‘upskilling’, ‘lifelong learning’ for ‘employability’. Science was seen as a prerequisite to ‘innovation’, aiming at quick exploitation by ‘the knowledge industries’. Close ties between research and industry (in the broad sense) or R(earch) and D(evelopment) were to be promoted. This diagnosis, you will recognize, is not new and not unique to Europe; it is OECD-speak.

The Bologna process was assimilated in both its rhetoric and its changing emphases, to the Lisbon process. The effect of this was to **exploit the political mandate** which Lisbon has (at least in the sense that governments really want to accomplish these aims; they don’t always “will the means”). **How is the Bologna cum Lisbon process being reconceptualized by 2005?** The titles and diagnoses of recent documents shows us. “Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy” (COM(2005)152 (April 2005). The “outcomes” of HE were analyzed within the framework of a 2002 “work programme” called “Education and Training 2010”. A discussion paper for the UK Presidency in October 2005 called “Activating Knowledge” was prepared by well known economist/business professor Luc Soete who tried to make a parallel with the 1970s’ “active labor market policy”. His diagnosis of the situation of Europe’s universities was the one in Commission papers as well: Europe provides as much public funding for its universities as does the US but the lack of “private” funding (i.e. from business, tuition, philanthropy) is what accounts for the huge difference in resources for higher education. Europe’s resources are spread over too many universities too uniformly. A fee structure (tuition) like that of the UK is proposed. Universities require a “critical mass” for research in specific areas. The goal of 3% GDP expenditure for research ought to be broadened to education as well. (The last is unusual.)

More recently “Delivering on the Modernization Agenda for Universities: Education, Research, and Innovation” (200 ,emphasis added) argues that the “good average performance” of European universities is undercut by fragmentation into small national systems, hampered academic mobility, and the demand for “uniformity”. (This means in uniformity in funding, in type of education offered, and, I would add, in status.) The prescription for making EHEA/ERA more “visible and attractive” worldwide (therefore able to compete in the recruitment of the best researchers, teachers, and students) is the Bologna mobility agenda plus “flexible, modernized curricula at all levels which correspond to the needs of the labour market”, the autonomy AND accountability of universities, new “governance” of universities (which means “professionalized management” and “activate(d) knowledge through interaction with

society” (which turns out to mean ‘structured partnerships with business’ so that there will be the “right mix of skills for the labour market”, cooperation with SMEs,) as well as “rewarding excellence”. Note the freighted symbol “modernization”, portraying proposed changes as a “valence issue”.

Are the preoccupations of policy elites in Canada about higher education and research akin to those expressed in Europe’s Lisbon Agenda?

I am going to reverse the order of treatment and consider first whether Canada is undergoing something akin to the Lisbon Process. First note that that agenda is explicitly competitive vis-à-vis the rest of the world. My sense is that Canada started worrying about that competition long before Bologna. We have already had at least some of the discussion in which Europe is now engaging. To take just two examples, in the early 1980s universities were suddenly having to establish norms and rules on the proportion of time for faculty “consulting”, and norms and regulations for the commercialization of the outcomes of research. From a later period: in 1999 the Quebec Government established a program, Valorisation-Recherche Quebec, the purpose of which was to invest in projects for the transfer of results of university research into industrial or social innovation. I could stand corrected but I believe we also already have a “diversified” higher education system. I don’t sense the urgency which Haug suggests above on the question of “employability”.

But there IS emphasis on the need for labor force skills for “competitiveness” in a world which is now ‘flat’ (or at least, flattening).(There is certainly research, for example, on what proportion of the working age population has what skills, what proportion continue to participate in educational programs under all kinds of auspices.) Worry about an “aging workforce” means looking for ways to draw as many as possible into the labor market. One aspect, qualifications barriers for immigrants, has already been discussed. Other elements are barriers to minorities, childcare (to draw women in), and importantly, improving the skills of those already participating. There is as well, but this is true in North America and Europe (competing with Asian countries) worry about the small numbers of students being attracted into science and engineering.

As an example of the other end of the spectrum, in 2002, the Federal Government announced a “**National Innovation Strategy**” to support HE and research “that serve Canada’s international competitiveness”. In a style that sounds very familiar, it set a target of ranking 5th in R&D performance by 2010 (sic!), and promised to at least double federal R&D funds. The AUCC responded with an “Action Plan” to double university research performance, increase knowledge transfer activities, and triple (collective) commercialization performance. (2005 Report, p10) The government and AUCC signed a “Framework of Agreed Principles” committing the latter to document this. In their document “Momentum. The 2005 Report on University Research and Knowledge Transfer” they argue that Canada is on track to meeting the agreed goals and that the federal government as well to doubling its invest by 2010. But Canada’s GERD (Gross expenditure on R&D) to GDP ratio, while increasing, was 2.05 compared to the OECD

average of 2.28, US 2.73, while the leaders were again Sweden, also Finland, Iceland, and Japan.(p33) This has been a longstanding worry in Canada, and meanwhile others are not standing still.(34)

On HE, rather than R&D alone, the AUCC's 2004 report on "Trends in Higher Education" stresses that population growth and increased participation rates predict a 20-30% increase in HE enrolment by 2010. The desire for more research at the same time will mean more faculty will be needed, requiring significant new funding, even with the commercialization of research. (The emphasis from the universities---not surprisingly---is on funding.)

So yes, Canada is focusing on many of the same issues. The Lisbon Agenda is really a commitment device for the European countries. It spotlights the relative strengths and weaknesses of the individual countries and develops an integrated rationale for changes. The Commission has been given permission to "herd cats" but the half-way mark report on the results of OMC in this area was not optimistic. Canada, like other advanced societies, maps and monitors many of the same elements for the same reasons, (although the particular weaknesses pinpointed may differ). What Canada does should be a result of its own situation in a globalizing world, rather than a response to what Europe per se is doing or not doing.

What should Canada do in relation to the increasing coherence and coordination of European HE systems (Bologna)?

While Lisbon is explicitly competitive, in the short term Bologna (which I shall use now as shorthand for the new cycles of degrees, the credit system, the Diploma Supplement, and (overlapping with Lisbon) the Framework of Qualifications as well as Quality Assessment), presents the choice of negotiating cooperation or of coordination. **Should Bologna be treated as a case of "external relations" or as a decision on "alignment"/coordination?**

Note that Canada is just beginning to follow what is transpiring. AUCC will hold discussions this fall in its international relations committee. As yet it has no documents available (or on its website) on Bologna. A 2004 study of ninety self-selected US and Canadian admissions professionals by Educational Credential Evaluators on knowledge of Bologna and issues relating to it, found 34% familiar with its general goals, 35% had heard of it but knew little about it, and 30% were unfamiliar with it (although a majority were familiar with ECTS!).

As an "external relations" issue, a major question will be "Will the three year degree be accepted as sufficient for admission to an MA program?" (British three year degrees traditionally have been, but those from elsewhere have not, part of the argument being how many years of primary and secondary school precede that degree.) There is apparently significant opposition to this in the US because they also take a "liberal arts" foundation years very seriously. (In Canada AUCC's membership criteria require that

“ undergraduate degree programs are characterized by breadth and depth in the traditional areas of the liberal arts and/or sciences, and first degrees of a professional nature...have a significant liberal arts and/or sciences component”. A second question is how to deal with ECTS credits, most immediately for exchanges but in the long run, for credit “accumulation”? At the moment, at my own university, we accept them (and they make life much easier!) as credits toward our degree but, (just as we do with transfer of credits from other universities whether in Canada or elsewhere) we do not put on our transcript , or utilize in computing the cumulative point average, the actual grades given by the other institution.

As an example of treatment **as an alignment issue** , it is revealing to read the forcefully written document of Australia’s Department of Education, Science, and Training, (April 2006). It sees its international enrollment, for semester exchanges, for its own students going abroad, jeopardized if it does not align. This is an example of “big picture” thinking ; the document is framed first as examining benefits of alignment, then risks of nonalignment, and last, the costs of aligning are treated as technical (computer system changes for the Diploma Supplement and QA!). Interestingly, first Australia is located in relation to Asia (its biggest student market). But because Asia is itself very interested in connections to the European system---for example, its new credit system is modeled on ECTS--- Australia finds that the consideration of Asia does not weigh against alignment. In fact, Australia is a good example of the “coordination” effect I mentioned before.

How similar would Canada’s situation be, were it to think in alignment terms?

Canada’s academic system is much more integrated with the US system. Its students often cross the border especially for graduate degrees, it attracts substantial numbers of US students, the academic market for professors is nearly one, its educational professional organizations, for example AUCC and CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation) and many other specialized ones, have close ties, etc. etc. For Canada, the relationship to US education might weigh against such a “coordination” position OR, if Canadian and US higher education organizations work together in thinking this through, (and each negotiating this through its system!) they might find a way such that the US factor is not countervailing for Canada. In any case, this is likely to be a more difficult decision for Canada than for Australia. (And I have left aside here the whole issue of both Canada and the US as a collection of states/provinces coordinated to some extent, by their professional non-governmental organizations.)

How should Canada treat the mechanisms for “establishing trust”?

Neither Canada nor the US has a formal, legal, accreditation system for universities. Instead, both countries have “bottom-up” systems. In Canada an organization was created by the universities, AUCC, with eighty-nine public and not-for-profit university level members, and which establishes membership criteria themselves specifying required standards. They ‘self-regulate’ in the sense that universities “recognize” qualifications only from universities which are members. There is currently a debate

about whether a “self-regulation” system should exist (for purposes of what amounts to accreditation). The debate in Canada is linked to the development of all kinds of “new providers” of higher education, including distance learning, foreign providers, and “applied colleges” (the latter established by some of the Provinces), none of which are eligible for membership in AUCC; the qualifications of their graduates are not being recognized (presumably for further education) by universities.

There is a wider debate, here and elsewhere, on the “accountability” of universities both to the public and to the governments who fund them. Into what is perceived as a vacuum has been inserted “rankings”, some by the media---now, belatedly, very criticized by some universities---some by government (the British “league tables”) and by others. The wider debate is a serious one.

One important question for Canada is: will university professors play a role in revising or devising any system changes---or will they be only the objects of it, as in Europe?

OECD, looking at the larger picture, sees a “shift” in the demand for information (by both publics and governments) from inputs to outcomes. The “epistemic community” of those doing empirical research on education at all levels also speaks the language of “learning outcomes”. (You will recognize this as a version of “management by objectives”, as well.)

In Europe, the idea and institutions of “Quality Assessment” has been used to find a way to create agencies at arms length from the Ministries of Education who regulate universities, agencies independent enough to be credible to universities in other countries. It is a way of going outside the governmental system. In North America QA seems to be a way of going outside (and challenging) the self-regulation, bottom up, systems. To add to the issues involved a 2004 OECD discussion paper said that new quality assurance guidelines should be designed to encourage the expansion of private and for-profit higher education providers.

Importantly, **under the term “qualifications” QA seems to be shifting the focus** not only from inputs to outcomes, but also **from institution to particular program.** Are frameworks of qualifications simply a formalization of what we have long accepted (or aspired to) some parts of which might well be testable? Or, is the focus on programs, to the extent that it disregards or minimizes the significance of institutions as a whole, really a focus on job skills? Should what I will call the ‘core university’ be measured by whether it is providing job skills? If so, in what sense? Literacy, numeracy, problem-solving? or employer-defined skills? **If University education becomes evaluated exclusively or predominantly in terms of packages of “qualifications”, subject to “quality assessment” from outside, what happens to university autonomy? What happens also to our concept of a university?**

A recent startlingly blunt analysis cum advocacy statement, “*The Public Responsibility of Higher Education: Preparation for the Labour Market*” (emphasis

added) by the brilliant principal “policy entrepreneur” of the Bologna Process, Dr. Guy Haug says it all. His analysis is that “...educational policy is less and less isolated from its context and is increasingly driven by economic and social issues”; “the employability of graduates has become an increasingly important and shared concern all over Europe”; “higher education is ever more integrated with economic policies as a key factor of competitiveness”. His prescriptions include a “dialogue between higher education and employers”. In only two places does he qualify the thrust of his argument: “‘Employability’ should always understood as sustainable employability rather than as a mere preparation for the immediate or short term needs of the labour market”. and “Employability is a key aspect that should be taken into account, along with others, when higher education institutions design or renovate curricula and learning methods.” (emphasis in original) He argues that universities always trained doctors, lawyers and churchmen; the only difference today is that so many more roles require higher education; he concludes from this that there is no fundamental contradiction “between employability and the development of humanistic, social, and citizenship aspects...” The background for the forceful thrust of this argument is huge youth, including graduates’, unemployment in many parts of Europe. Will the sophisticated qualifications be lost? **Should there be equivalent anxiety in Canada, warranting the general thrust of the argument and such prescriptions?**

Questions of institutional change are, of course, for Canada’s internal debate, but as M. /Yves Beaudin of the CMEC’s “Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials”(CICIC) put it:

As other countries develop qualifications frameworks, we will, as a nation, have to better demonstrate how our education systems operate...how we assess quality...and guarantee quality...

Here is where external relations and alignment may come together.