

COMMENTS FOLLOWING THE POLICY MEMO - THE BOLOGNA PROCESS FOR A EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADA

Policy Workshop: Social Policy and Labour Market Integration in the EU and Canada
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Satya Brink, Ph.D.
Director, National Policy Research
Learning Policy Directorate
Human Resources and Social Development Canada

INTRODUCTION

I am honoured to be invited to participate in this Policy Workshop: Social Policy and Labour Market Integration in the EU and Canada and to offer some comments from a Canadian public policy research perspective.

Let me explain my credentials for making such comments. I am the Director of National Policy Research on Learning and my group conducts analyses and develops research evidence for decision making by the Minister and cabinet. Secondly, I am a member of the Canadian delegation to the Education Committee of the OECD. A large number of OECD member countries are signatories to the Bologna Process. Thirdly, on behalf of the federal government, I attended the seminar on The External Dimensions of the Bologna Process, held this year (2006) in Athens, Greece. Finally, I had the opportunity to discuss the Bologna Process developments with senior officials from the US, Australian and New Zealand governments, all of whom find themselves in a similar position to Canada.

SUGGESTED CANADIAN RESPONSE TO THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

Barbara Haskell, in her policy memo raised the question: What should Canada do in relation to the Bologna Process and my comments respond to it. The eight minutes allowed do not permit to address so large a question in detail. Therefore, I will cut to the chase and suggest four steps and later elaborate on them.

Canada should:

1. Retain benchmark status – be part of the “dominant group” to use Haskell’s terminology.
2. Monitor the progress of Bologna.
3. Adopt nationally attractive versions of key elements – such as the Diploma Supplement and quality assurance – and use these to advantage nationally as well as to shape the process internationally.
4. Facilitate mobility- within Canada, Canadians going to Europe, European coming to Canada, but more importantly to facilitate Canadians going to study in other countries and to receive international students from other countries. This can be

achieved by being “Bologna compatible” without making major structural changes.

REASONS FOR THE SUGGESTED RESPONSE

1. Retain benchmark status:

- North America is seen as holding the lead in post-secondary education. A survey of foreign student perception described during the meeting in Athens showed that desirable features of European universities were culture, history/tradition, easy access, safety and “elegance” however, the factors on which their choices would be made, such as quality of education, reputation, innovation, dynamism, infrastructure and employability were associated with American universities. The US has indicated little interest in the process and has stated that quality, such as that offered by the elite universities of the US, will always have a high demand among international students. Quality rather than process or structure is the key. Canada and Australia are also seen having successful post secondary education systems.
- Canadian post-secondary education does not have the same problems as the European system. The status of European universities measured by many indicators chosen by them (such as publications, Nobel prizes, attracting super star professors, etc) shows them in decline. They are primarily publicly funded and they are under increasing financial pressure because of their tradition of free tuition, generous means of funding or subsidizing living costs and provision of other benefits. Students take up to 12 years to complete a bachelor’s degree because of these benefits and because of high youth unemployment. European universities see fee paying international students as a source of revenue, since the laws permit such charges for non-citizens. Many countries cannot reform without a legislative process and rather than take contentious national action which would garner negative reaction at home, the way forward was easier with strategic, future-oriented, multilateral action.
- Diversity in the Canadian post secondary system is an advantage. The diversified system includes the CEGEP system in Quebec, honours programs, college, trade and vocational programs. Links with employers through co-op programs and research provide real life experiences and a market test. It is also a much more flexible system, since Canada does not resort to streaming in schools or to strict occupational lines of post secondary education.
- Canada has elite programs, rather than elite universities and this reputation is earned and maintained over time.
- Canadians programs are more suited to a knowledge based society/economy because they promote a wider base of knowledge and skills through core curriculum and electives, double degrees and multidisciplinary degrees. The three year programs, especially with

harmonization under Bologna, are seen as very restrictive in terms of content coverage.

- All in all, it would appear that costs, in terms of political negotiation within the federated system, administrative effort for restructuring and revamping funding for institutions and students, would outweigh benefits from harmonization with the Bologna requirements. These views were shared by Australia and New Zealand for their own countries as well.

2. Monitoring Progress: Canada should monitor both negative and positive factors.

Negative

- There is uneven implementation across countries and universities.
- Many countries are concerned about the status of their polytechnics and colleges and there has been a call to widen the discussion to include these.
- It is an open question whether both three and four year degrees can co-exist and the impact on their currency in the labour market. Italy has voiced concerns. Some universities have pointed out that it is difficult to cover the course content in three years, not only for professional programs which are assigned four years. The options for multidisciplinary programs are very limited and require a second degree. Employers have stated that they prefer the maturity of students who have undertaken four year programs.
- Quality assurance is misunderstood. The assurance refers to a minimum standard that has been met in order to achieve harmonisation. Anything above this is discretionary, though desirable. Such a target makes it difficult for universities to be “world class” or to meet the Lisbon Agenda objective of becoming “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world”.

Positive

- Erasmus Mundus and the Atlantis agreement encourage student exchange between Europe and Canada. There are also a number of inter-university programs and ad hoc exchanges. These are likely to grow.
- The Diploma Supplement is a useful idea. However, it is now a rather simple document with limited information and can be improved for the Canadian context. It should add value to the course and grade transcripts universities already provide.
- Quality assurance is an imperative in a competitive environment. There have been calls for a Canada-wide qualifications framework such as the one available in the UK and the one being developed the EU which includes both academic and vocational PSE.
- The universal portal being developed for international students considering study in Europe can serve as a model for Canada. Harmonization could also result in some standard admission procedures across universities.

3. Adopt nationally attractive versions of key elements

Such elements could help contribute to the Canadian system being “Bologna compatible”.

- In order to have standardized credits that have the same value in different countries, a student based system is being developed to record credits earned called the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTAS). Canada is working to establish the Enhanced Student Information System (ESIS) which will track a student’s earned credits regardless of source. This will provide valuable information for purposes of credit transfer, admission to higher education and employment. It could also serve as the foundation for a lifelong learning system.
- The Diploma Supplement can be a valuable addition, particularly if there is additional information about the university, the program and the faculty. This could be used along with a transcript. There are some pilot projects to develop a Diploma Supplement for Canada.
- Credit transfer: The ease with which credits can be transferred among European universities and the process by which this is implemented should offer lessons for Canada. Currently, such transfers work well within some provinces between colleges and universities or between member universities of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. In Canada, there continues to be the perception that transfers are required because of interrupted education, whereas in Europe, it is seen as an asset due to exposure to a different university, learning language and culture.

4. Facilitate student mobility

- Currently, the greatest exchange of students and labour force is with the United States under NAFTA and this relationship cannot be jeopardized by a wholesale move to Bologna requirements.
- The exchange of students between Europe and Canada can be facilitated by keeping our system “Bologna compatible”. The flow from Europe is greater than the flow to Europe and this is understandable when the forty five member countries are examined. Most Canadian students would be interested in the major countries and economies such as the UK, France and Germany.
- Canada has a small share of international students, which could definitely be increased. Of about 100 million students in the world, about 2 million study abroad. Canada attracts about 5% of this group from all countries (OECD, Education at a Glance, 2006). It should be noted that most of these international students are not from Europe.
- Canada has major advantages in attracting international students.
 - Unlike, the UK, France or Belgium, Canada does not attract students from past colonies.
 - It is attractive to students from the Asia Pacific, because of the ties between the Pacific Rim countries and APEC member countries.

- English or French is the language of instruction whereas in Europe many countries are newly instituting programs in English.
- Students are attracted to high immigration countries such as the US, Canada and Australia as education in the country increases their chances of later immigration.
- Because Canada allows about two years of work following a degree there is a greater opportunity to increase skills related to the knowledge gained in university through application in paid employment.

CANADIAN LEADERSHIP

Hard data, particularly on competencies in relation to credentials is scarce. Canada has a pioneering longitudinal survey called the Youth in Transition Survey, which follows students from the age 15 in 2000, every two years, until age 24. An internationally benchmarked assessment (OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA) was conducted at age 15. Funds have been received to conduct a second assessment to be able to examine patterns of learning loss and gain in relation to their educational pathways. The survey is funded by Human Resources and Social Development Canada and is carried out by Statistics Canada. Both the OECD and the EU have expressed interest in this research.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The evolving international context cannot be ignored. Countries of Asia already have systems of education that are graduating world class graduates. Perceptions of superiority must give way to the notions of true exchange. India and China have a third of the world's consumers and both are growing in economic power and educational progress. If ASEAN countries set up their own Bologna like system, would Canada opt to reform its system to match? Canada, should retain a post secondary system that is world class but one that is uniquely Canadian rather than to adapt to various external pressures. It should, however, maintain the means for student mobility and knowledge flow.

There has been much rhetoric about lifelong learning in both Canada and in the Bologna Process. However, the current post secondary system is ill equipped to deal with lifelong learning since it focuses on initial education for young full time students. Lifelong learning means a lifelong interaction with the learning system. For instance, airline pilots re-certify every year. In the knowledge society/economy, with a short half life of current knowledge combined with phenomenal growth in new knowledge and technology, there should be opportunities for upgrading of degrees. In order to have a nimble labour market, it is important to have an adaptable labour force. This can only be achieved if institutions of higher learning also offer opportunities for re-skilling, multi-skilling and multidisciplinary knowledge. To be competitive, the post secondary system will have to be more market responsive – responsive to those who pay for their education in order to better fulfill all their adult roles: as students, parents, workers and citizens.