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Bologna and Beyond

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Bologna and Beyond (Usher and Green, 2009) is based in large part on research conducted by the Educational Policy Institute (EPI Canada) in 2008 for the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council (CTHRC). With the aim of developing a pan-Canadian framework for credit transfer and increasing the appeal of Canadian postsecondary education to international students, CTHRC commissioned EPI Canada to examine the transferability of recent European developments in learning recognition to the Canadian context. The adoption of common degree structures, the development of a competency-based approach to curriculum development in some European universities, and the development of common transparency instruments in Europe – Europass documents, the European Credit Transfer System, and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning – have captured global attention. These developments are expected to improve student and labour mobility within the European region and prepare Europe for intensifying competition in global education and labour markets.

The sustainability of economic development and postsecondary education systems will also require that Canada can compete effectively for international students and workers in future. There are growing calls in Canada, therefore, for the development of pan-Canadian frameworks to support student and labour mobility in Canada and abroad. With these ends in mind, the Educational Policy Institute produced two reports comparing European and Canadian systems of credential recognition, credit transfer, and prior learning assessment and recognition and proposing recommendations for future developments in learning recognition in Canada. These reports will be published in 2009 on the CTHRC website (in both official languages).

Educational Policy Institute (2009). *Toward a Pan-Canadian Credit Transfer System: Frameworks for the Recognition of Learning in Canada*. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council. Available at: http://cthrc.ca/en/research_publications/credential_recognition/credit_learning_transfer_system.aspx

Educational Policy Institute (2009). *Toward a Pan-Canadian Credit Transfer System: Frameworks for the Recognition of Learning in Europe*. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council. Available at: http://cthrc.ca/en/research_publications/credential_recognition/credit_learning_transfer_system.aspx

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I. Introduction

Over the course of the last 50 years, the European Union (EU) has been involved in a unique project that is bringing the continent's nation-states into an ever-closer political and economic union. Now with 27 members, the EU seeks to create a common economic area over its 4.3 million sq. km territory. This is a daunting undertaking. Quite apart from the political and legal difficulties involved in reducing barriers to the mobility of labour and capital, there are also practical barriers of mutual incomprehension of languages, networks, and institutions which impeded mobility in these areas. The areas of educational and labour market mobility are prime examples. Labour market mobility is limited by the practical fact that there are twenty major languages represented within the EU, and simple limitations on the ability to master more than a handful of these to the level required by working situations inevitably limits mobility. Even if one does have the requisite language ability, one's education career and credentials may have occurred in systems which are quite different from the ones in the society in which one wishes to work, and employers' unfamiliarity with foreign educational systems can therefore also be a barrier to mobility. In short, employers need to be able to understand a prospective employees' credential and they need to trust the institution that

In pursuit of more perfect mobility within an ever-closer union, the EU has become involved in a host of policy initiatives to improve it. At first, these were simple student exchange programs; but these individual initiatives have grown to massive size, involving education and labour market stakeholders in a massive re-think of what it takes to ensure mobility. The eventual answer was a startling one: since employers' could not be expected to become familiar with the educational systems of two dozen other countries, it would be necessary to harmonize significant aspects of these countries' educational systems.

The result has been the creation of two overarching frameworks to orchestrate pan-European harmonization in education. The more famous of these is known as the "Bologna Process", which was created to co-ordinate the development of a European Higher Education Area by 2010 (European agreements tend to be named after the city in which they were drafted – a full glossary of these may be found in Appendix A). The other, which deals with developments in Vocational Education and Training, is known as the "Copenhagen Process".

Between the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, a tremendous amount of work has been done to increase mobility within education and to improve the transparency of educational credentials. In higher education, the three-degree cycle has become a continental standard, and unofficially the lengths of the degrees is converging on a standard of three years for a first degree, two for a second and three for the third ("3+2+3"). Common standards of educational quality assurance mechanisms have been developed. Two continent-wide common credit systems have been developed – the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in higher education and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) (Le Mouillour, 2005). A set of documents known as "Europass" are in use to enable learning achievements to be readable and transparent to educational and training institutions and employers across Europe, whether the learning acquired in an academic setting or in supervised work or training. But developments in harmonization are not confined to Bologna and Copenhagen. Outside both of these projects, A European Qualifications Framework has been created to make qualifications in any part of the Union translatable to qualifications in any other part of the Union. A project known as "Tuning" is

beginning to set continent-wide standards on learning outcomes in various academic disciplines. And standards and guidelines have been developed to ensure the consistent provision of services such as foreign credential assessment and the validation of informal and non-formal learning by VINFL providers. In short, there is a generalized move even outside the Bologna and Copenhagen frameworks towards developing more competency-based assessments so as to make learning more transferable and to make clearer paths for laddering between credentials.

These impressive efforts have not gone entirely unnoticed in Canada. Yet because the rather complicated context in which they have been implemented is not always well-understood, the lessons of Europe are not always clear. Do Bologna, Copenhagen and other related developments represent some level of co-operation and harmonization to which Canada should aspire? Or is Europe, in its creation of a “common higher education, work, and training area” merely re-creating something Canada already has? Is Europe leaping ahead, or is it merely catching up? The purpose of this document is to shed light on precisely these questions – to provide the background not just to Bologna but also to its lesser-known counterparts, and to decipher what lessons if any they hold for Canada.

In Part I of this document, we examine what “Bologna” is – and look not just at the Bologna itself, but at the wider movement to restructure and re-define higher learning in Europe. In Part II, we compare developments in Europe to the situation in Canada, and examine which areas Bologna and related phenomena just represents Europe catching up with Canada, and which represent a step beyond where Canada is. Finally, in Part III, we examine the implications of Bologna for Canada, and look at what might need to change in Canada for our system to remain internationally competitive.

II. The Construction of a Common European Education, Training, and Work Area

One of the founding principles of the European Union, dating back to its inception in 1957, is the free movement of labour across its member states. This is not simply an economic goal, beloved of free-traders, important as that may be; it is also a statement of political unity. It is meant to be a tangible benefit of economic union from which every citizen can benefit; the right to work where one chooses within the many different polities represented by the Union.

However, having the right to work anywhere is one thing – having the practical ability to do so is another. It is not simply a matter of the considerable language barriers that separate the 27 countries of the EU – it is the fact that it is quite difficult in practical terms to have one’s skills and experiences properly recognized outside one’s own country or region. Partly, this is just an issue of parochialism (immigrants to Canada, for instance, often have difficulty being hired because they “don’t have Canadian job experience”). But in Europe there has historically been a genuine problem with credential recognition. In North America, a degree structure of 4 years for a Bachelor’s degree, 1-2 years for a master’s degree, followed by a doctorate has with a few exceptions (a 3-year bachelor’s degree in Quebec, a tendency to skip the Master’s Degree in a number of programs at Ivy League universities) been the norm for several decades. Because it is the norm, people within North America have very little difficulty having their skills recognized. The word “Bachelor’s” or “Master’s” is sufficient for employers to get a very clear picture of the length of time someone has spent in school and the kinds of competencies they are likely to have. Not so in Europe. Prior to the introduction of Bologna, there was a riot of different program names and lengths: a first degree might only last three years in Britain, but could take as long as six in Germany and parts of Scandinavia. This not only had implications for student mobility between degrees, but labour market implications as well. Because most employers are only conversant with the local system of higher education, getting one’s skills and credentials recognized elsewhere in the union was difficult. Thus, the mobility rights guaranteed in theory by the Union were not necessarily available to citizens in practice. It was precisely to remove this barrier to mobility that the Bologna Process was created. Through the creation of common definitions and common standards for degrees, Bologna as meant to help create a single “area” within which credits would be portable and credentials would be commonly recognizable. But Bologna, as we shall see, is only the beginning of the story. Besides Bologna, a host of other mutually reinforcing initiatives have begun to develop common standards in other areas, all with the goals of increasing learning and labour mobility. It is to these various processes that we now turn.

The Bologna Process (Higher Education)

The Bologna Process, which began in 1999, was an ambitious attempt to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA)¹ by 2010. Under the Bologna Declaration of 1999, which applies to university and other higher (advanced technical) education, higher education structures in Europe were aligned through the initial introduction of two diploma cycles (Bachelor, Masters), and then later a third (Doctorate) educational cycle. While initially the Bologna process included only the member and candidate states of the European Union, it soon expanded to encompass 46 states, taking in all of the members of

¹ More information about the process of creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is available online at: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

the Council of Europe (which includes not just the states of the EU, but also those of the European Free Trade Area, the Vatican, several Balkan states and much of the former Soviet Union).

The Bologna process did not arise out of nothingness – it arose on the back of earlier efforts to promote mobility. Student mobility programs such as the Erasmus program were initiated as long ago as the 1980s, though initially many had a linguistic focus. While the program has served many thousands of students over time, take-up of this program is not especially high, with less than 1% of students taking part in any given year (Lipinska, Schmid, and Tessaring, 2007). One of the weaknesses of the Erasmus approach was that students could not be guaranteed that their studies or training abroad would receive credit at home and as a result, students' timely progress through their studies was delayed. The reason for non-mutual recognition of courses was relatively straight forward: different countries had very different ways of measuring progress and many had no North American style system of credits; as a result, institutions had no common way of communicating with one another about the amount of work a student did during his/her year abroad. This led to efforts to develop a common system of credits across Europe, which became known as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

ECTS introduced the principle that the workload of a full-time student in one academic year could be measured as 60 credits – prior to this, national credit systems counted student work in vastly different ways – and in many countries there was no system of credits at all. ECTS allows credit to be allocated to all types of study programs, regardless of their length, composition, or nature. Credits apply to first, second, and third cycle programs. In higher education, first cycle (undergraduate) study equates to 180-240 credits. Second cycle (one or two years masters graduate level) study would equate to a further 60-120 credits). Credit for the third cycle (doctoral level) is not specified. Programs may consist of year-long courses, work placements, and research. Credits can also be used for stand-alone courses, such as modules offered to learners who are not engaged in a full cycle program of study.

ECTS was introduced on a large scale in Europe between 2000 and 2005, and by 2006/2007, it was in place in the majority of European countries (Eurydice, 2007). Today, ECTS has expanded to more than 30 countries and has been introduced in more than one thousand higher education institutions. Institutions which are applying ECTS correctly for all their degree programs can receive the ECTS label. ECTS is being introduced on a mandatory basis; national-level legislation supports its uptake by universities in some countries and in others ECTS is a requirement for university accreditation.

But while ECTS may have represented a decent start to the idea of harmonizing higher education structures across Europe, bigger problems still remained; mostly with respect to different lengths of degrees and number of degree cycles. This was Bologna's starting point: it incorporated the earlier process of ECTS and then went on to encompass two other, larger goals, namely:

1. *The creation of common degree cycles and lengths.* Prior to the introduction of Bologna, the countries of Europe had very different degree structures. Some had the kind of three degree (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate) structure that we take for granted in North America. Most did not: many had a long (6 years or more) first degree which resulted in the awarding a "Magister" degree which could lead directly to a doctorate. Further east, in the former Soviet Union, the Doctorate was not a terminal degree – a further qualification had to be obtained before professorships could be obtained. This created real problems for labour mobility and educational mobility. From the point of view of education, different lengths of first degree programs made it difficult for people to move between countries to obtain a second degree of entrance standards

could not take account of differences. From the labour mobility perspective, the fact that degrees had such different names and different lengths made the accurate assessment of the skills of foreigners quite difficult and left immigrants at a permanent disadvantage in the labour market with respect to others with similar skills who were educated domestically.

2. *The creation of common quality assurance standards and processes.* The Bologna process has enshrined a particular way of looking at quality in education. In fact, Bologna has enshrined a three-tier approach to quality assurance. Institutions, of course, have primary responsibility for ensuring educational quality. But their processes and outcomes are also reviewed by an external body, known as a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). And the QAAs themselves are also subject to oversight through a peer review mechanism of other QAAs around Europe. The manner in which institutions and QAAs go about their business may differ somewhat from country to country, but the notion that all countries must have external QAAs which oversee institutions' own quality assessment work – an idea once considered quite radical in many parts of Europe - is now universal in Europe.

The creation of these common quality standards was the result of two years of consultation among quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, and student representatives took place. The principles are outlined in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)². Since the adoption of these principles in 2005 by the national Ministers responsible for higher education, these standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance have been disseminated, discussed, and promoted widely throughout Europe.

In 2004, a European quality assurance network that had existed since 2000 to support cooperation in quality assurance, was renamed the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)³. Like its predecessor organization, ENQA is funded by the European Commission. ENQA supports the sharing of knowledge and experience related to quality assurance practices. The Association publishes numerous reports and external reviews of national quality assurance agencies on its website. Following acceptance of the ESG, a European Register of quality assurance agencies (EQAR) was developed by ENQA, together with the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the European Students Union (ESU). EQAR manages a registry of quality assurance agencies that comply with the ESG and publishes national-level quality assurance reports.

The notion of common standards is key in other ways as well: common degree lengths, but also common definitions of what constitutes a “credit”. Under ECTS, credits are defined using estimated student workloads – that is, the time required to complete planned learning activities such as attending lectures,

² Information about the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is available online at: http://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/e4/050221_ENQA_report.pdf and at: <http://www.eqar.eu/application/requirements/european-standards-and-guidelines.html>

³ Information about ENQA and EQAR is available online at <http://www.enqa.eu/index.lasso> and <http://www.eqar.eu/>

seminars, independent and private study, preparation of projects, labs, examinations, and so forth. The student workload of a full-time study program in Europe amounts in most cases to 1500 to 1800 hours per year. One credit therefore represents 25 to 30 working hours of student effort. This is in contrast to the North American notion of a credit as being a function of class contact hours.

Agreements are made at the European level using what is called the “open method of coordination” (OMC). This is a joint process in which member states and social partners voluntarily set objectives and benchmarks for progress. OMC is a framework for cooperation organized around common objectives that is measured to determine progress towards those objectives and reviewed in an ongoing process of development. Changes are spread through pilot projects and through the dissemination of best practice.

The Copenhagen Process (Vocational Education and Training)

The Copenhagen Process in vocational education and training mirrors the Bologna Process in higher education. The broad goals of Copenhagen Declaration are the enhancement of European cooperation in VET and improvement of the overall performance, quality, flexibility, and attractiveness of VET in Europe. Key priorities include constructing a common European labour and training space, improving transparency in VET, recognizing VET competencies and qualifications, and promoting quality assurance in VET.

Like Bologna, Copenhagen was preceded by other mobility efforts: for the Erasmus program, just read the “Leonardo da Vinci Program”. And, although it is a more recent development, the Copenhagen Process has equal significance to the Bologna Process. The reforms that have been called for under the 2002 Copenhagen Declaration include:

- Promoting transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competencies and qualifications, between countries and levels of education, by developing reference levels, common principles for certification, and common measures, including a credit transfer system for vocational education and training;
- increasing support for the development of competencies and qualifications at the sectoral level, by reinforcing cooperation and co-ordination among stakeholders; and
- developing common principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning to increase compatibility between countries and levels.

Since policy developments in vocational education and training in Europe are younger than developments in the higher education area, information about progress on reforms in the VET area is still very limited (European Commission, 2008c).

As with the Bologna process, establishing a common credit transfer system was a major priority. The diversity of national credit systems in VET make it difficult to identify, validate, and recognize learning outcomes acquired during a stay in another country. ECVET was launched officially as a pilot in 2008 (European Commission, 2008b) to overcome these difficulties. ECVET allows a record of credit points to be created based on acquired competencies for the purpose of credit transfer and accumulation. The objective of ECVET is to support and promote transnational mobility and access to lifelong learning in VET.

Since most European VET systems are competency-based learning systems, VET is highly compatible with the ECVET system. In the ECVET system, credit points are tied to learning outcomes, that is, to knowl-

edge, skills and competencies that are part of a qualification. A year's workload in ECVET is valued as 120 points, which compares to 60 credit points in ECTS. Competencies are associated with workloads, and credits are each equivalent to 25-30 hours of student workload. This can be broken down further to assign workload values to units. Units can be specific to a single occupation or common to several occupations; a unit is identical to the functions or procedures of the occupation. Each credit therefore accounts for a small set of occupational competencies, similar to a work-task. Consideration is being given to the idea of assigning an expiry date to technical/vocational skills, due to the rate of change in workplaces and workplace technology.

The similarities between the ECVET and ECTS in terms of the methods used to decide credit values are fairly obvious. As a result of these similarities, not only is it expected that ECVET will improve the mobility of learners within VET, it should also facilitate greater transferability and laddering between VET and higher education. ECVET is used to recognize the skills and competencies that are acquired through prior learning, and is therefore also expected to support lifelong learning (see the sections below about the validation of informal and nonformal learning (VINFL) and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) for further discussion of prior learning). ECVET may also effectively become a bridging tool between informal learning and both further and higher education. The use of learning outcomes rather than program inputs in training and qualifications is expected to increase the relevance of ECVET to industry.

The voluntary adoption of ECVET by European countries is expected to be a lengthy process. Where ECVET is adopted and applied in existing national systems, credit points will work as a form of convertible currency, such that individual learners will be able to assemble their own individualized (credentials) programs based on multi-national experiences.

As with Bologna, and for precisely the same reasons, Copenhagen also has a major emphasis on quality assurance. Improvements in the quality of VET systems and provision are expected to improve the status of VET in participating countries. Parallel to the quality assurance measures taken in the Bologna process, indicators for a European Network on Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET)⁴ were developed in 2005.

Similar to the ENQA in the higher education area, ENQA-VET supports the exchange of knowledge and experience to build quality assurance practices in the VET area and encourages the adoption of the Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET in Europe⁵ (CQAF) and self-assessment practices associated with that framework (European Commission, 2008d, 2005b). The Quality Assurance National Reference Points are responsible for the engagement of stakeholders in the development of quality assurance procedures and for their dissemination.

The Tuning Project

A number of European universities responded to the Bologna Declaration in 2000 by developing a project called "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe"⁶. This project – which is technically not part of the Bologna process – shares some considerable inspiration with the latter. The intention of Tuning is to

⁴ More information about the activities of the European Network on Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET) is available online at: <http://www.enqavet.eu/>

⁵ More Information about Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET in Europe (CQAF) can be found online at <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/qualitynet/cqaf.pdf>

increase recognition and integration, while also supporting program diversity. Its goal was to make curricula within a single field of study comparable across the whole continent by bringing programs that did not conform to the structure of the diploma cycles into alignment with this structure.

The Tuning Project emerged in response to growing interest in quality in higher education in Europe, and the belief that quality is at the heart of the construction of the common European Higher Education Area. Employability is considered a key aspect of quality. Interest in how well academic education prepared students for employment came from both students and employers.

A key aspect of the work of the Tuning project was the translation of competencies into credits, using ECTS, the European credit transfer system. A model for curriculum development was developed called the Tuning model for European Comparable degrees⁷. The Tuning methodology was developed to identify generic and subject-specific competencies (skills, knowledge, and content) in various subject areas. For the purposes of Tuning, competencies were defined as “common reference points, which allowed for flexibility and autonomy in curriculum development.” The generic competencies identified included instrumental, interpersonal, and systemic competencies.

In its first phase, from 2000 to 2002, the Tuning project was conducted between 100 universities in the following key subject areas: Business Administration, Education Sciences, Geology, History, Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry. In phase two, the findings of the first phase of the project were applied to two further areas of study, an applied science (nursing) and an interdisciplinary field (European Studies). In its second phase the project was expanded to include applied universities and thirty more universities joined the project.

Consultations among graduates, employers, and academics were used to identify generic competencies. The generic competencies that were identified across academic subjects included the capacity for analysis and synthesis, the capacity to learn, and problem solving. Other generic competencies were identified related to employability, such as the capacity for applying knowledge in practice, the capacity to adapt to new situations, concern for quality, information management skills, ability to work autonomously, team work, capacity for organizing and planning, oral and written communication, and interpersonal skills. Subject working groups did the work of identifying specific competencies.

One of the aims of the Tuning Project was to have teaching activities reflect their intended learning outcomes or competencies. At the same time, a key consideration in the Tuning Project’s focus on learning outcomes was to support much greater flexibility than a traditional approach to program design, such that different pathways could conceivably lead to comparable outcomes (both specific and generic). The Tuning project is not about standardizing curriculum; there are many different curricula which could be used to develop specific competencies in students. Tuning, which translates curricula into learning outcomes expressed as competencies is basically a way of ensuring common outcomes without standardizing curricula.

European Qualifications Frameworks

“The idea of qualifications frameworks is to provide the overarching system-level architecture into which individual qualifications fit” (Crosier, Purser, and Smidt, 2007). Transparency and mutual recognition of

⁶ Information about the Tuning Project is available on the Tuning Education Structures in Europe website at: <http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>

⁷ This and other reports are available online at: <http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>

qualifications are basic requirements for increasing the mobility of vocational training and for developing a common European work area. Qualifications frameworks enhance transparency and make the access provided by qualifications to further study or the labour market readily understood. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are also expected to provide a means by which problems of trust will be overcome. NQFs will be developed based on common principles to provide quality assurance.

Most European countries have a very rigid border between vocational education and training and higher education. There is mobility within higher education but very little mobility between VET and higher education. One of the big challenges faced in attempting to link vocational and higher education pathways was the need to develop a credit conversion formula for VET. When this challenge was overcome with the development of ECVET, it became possible to develop the EQF.

There are two European-level qualifications frameworks. The Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (referred to earlier) is a partial qualifications framework which applies only to the higher education area. The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, which was adopted in April 2008, is a significant development because this new framework provides an all-encompassing outcomes-based framework for post-secondary qualifications in all sectors of education and training (VET and higher education).

Europe's education and training systems are so diverse that a shift to learning outcomes was necessary to enable comparison and cooperation between countries and institutions. The EQF emphasizes the results of learning rather than inputs such as program level and length. A learning outcome is defined as a statement of what a learner knows, understands, and is able to do on completion of a learning process. Learning outcomes are specified in three categories - knowledge, skills and competencies. Qualifications expressed as learning outcomes therefore reflect theoretical knowledge, practical and technical skills, and competencies (European Commission, 2008a). Since the EQF is an outcomes-based framework, it provides a common basis for understanding the outcomes represented by national qualifications. The two main aims of the EQF are to promote the mobility of citizens between countries and to facilitate lifelong learning. The EQF is a common European reference framework which links national qualifications systems together, acting as a translation device that makes qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and educational systems in Europe. The EQF is a meta-framework that is intended to help in identifying points of articulation between national frameworks. It will also be used as a point of reference in the development and review of National Qualifications Frameworks. It is expected that the EQF for Lifelong Learning will greatly enhance the transferability of qualifications across Europe and also across educational sectors.

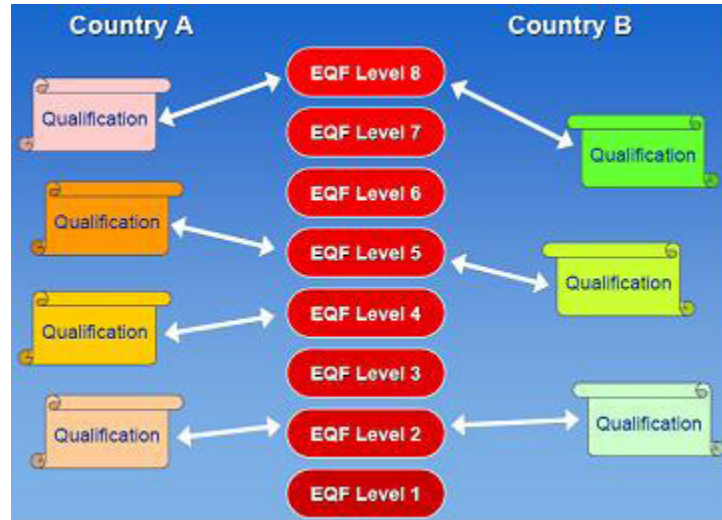
Figure 1. EQF for Lifelong Learning: An Outcomes Based Framework



Source: European Commission, 2007

The EQF relates different countries' national qualifications systems and frameworks together with eight reference levels (for level descriptors). The eight levels of the framework cover the full range of qualifications, from basic (e.g. secondary school leaving certificates) to advanced (e.g. Doctorates) levels (refer to Figure 2). All of the qualifications that can be acquired in general, vocational/academic education and training, as well as initial and continuing education and training are encompassed by the framework. The scope of the framework and the fact that it brings VET and academic education together makes it a powerful tool for the promotion of lifelong learning. The shift to learning outcomes that is promoted by the EQF, and responded to through the setting up of National Qualifications Frameworks all over Europe, is expected to prove important for the promotion of the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Figure 2. Translation Function of the EQF for Lifelong Learning



Source: European Commission, 2007

The first four levels of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning correspond to vocational education and the upper four levels correspond to higher education, with the fifth level forming a kind of boundary between VET and higher education qualifications. One of the big challenges that will likely be encountered in implementing the EQF is the difference in how competencies are defined across countries. For example, as a key informant explained, in one country, machine operation might be a level 3 qualification, while in Hungary it might be a level 2 or 3 qualification. A European Advisory Group with representatives from all the countries, will work out national differences in the levels assigned to qualifications.

The EQF is expected to benefit educational institutions by increasing the market for and access to higher education. National qualifications frameworks are expected to contribute to improved mobility within Europe based on the expectation that they will increase the transparency of qualifications and, in this, improve learning recognition. Qualifications frameworks provide information about qualifications to individuals to help them make informed choices about the worth, value, and recognition of a particular course of study. It is expected that NQFs will provide information that can assist learners in identifying progression paths through a series of qualifications and in seeking fair local, national, or international recognition of their educational achievements. Beyond the significance of this development for Europe, there is a sense among some onlookers outside Europe that the EQF will be recognized as an international standard.

Europass Transparency Instruments

In 1998, the European Commission and The Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) set up the European forum on the transparency of vocational qualifications. This forum brought together social partners (for example, trade unions and chambers of commerce, industry, and trade) and representatives of national training authorities. The work of the forum led to the creation of National Reference Points for Vocational Qualifications (NRPs) (which are described in the next section about creden-

tial evaluation and recognition) and the adoption of two of the Europass mobility documents, i.e. the Europass CV and the Certificate Supplement.

- the Europass CV is a standard European curriculum vitae which is used by individuals to make their qualifications and skills visible
- the Certificate Supplement is delivered to those who earn a vocational education and training certificate; the supplement adds to the information provided in the official certificate, making it more easily understood by employers or institutions outside the country in which it was issued.

The Europass portfolio includes three further documents, which were originally developed at the European level in the late 1990's:

- the Diploma Supplement (DS) was created jointly by the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO. The DS is produced by higher education institutions to help ensure that higher education diplomas are easily understood outside the country where they were awarded;
- the Europass Language Passport records individuals' language skills, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages;
- the Europass Mobility passport records work placement experiences abroad as part of education or training, and other experiences, for example academic periods abroad.

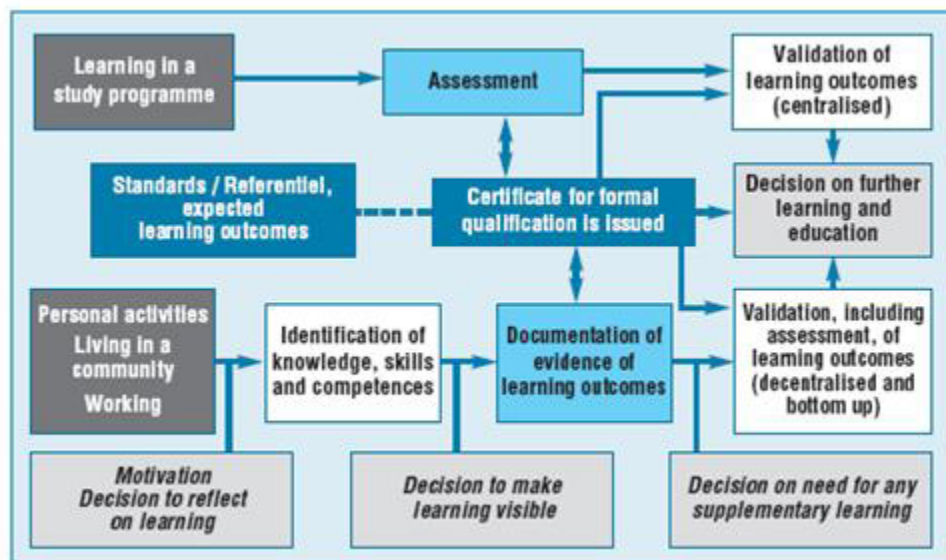
The European Commission's proposal of a combined framework for the transparency of qualifications and competencies (Europass) was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe in 2004. In 2005, these five documents were brought together as the Europass portfolio. The Europass mobility tools support learning recognition by making learning outcomes readable and more easily comparable across national boundaries. The tools also provide a means by which students and workers can document their learning and training experiences and outcomes. These tools provide a standardized method of presenting the learning that is acquired in school, at university, or while studying or training abroad.

Developments in the Validation of Informal and Nonformal Learning

Many projects at local, regional, and national levels have been taking place in Europe to advance the development of rigorous approaches to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Non-formal learning is structured intentional learning that takes place outside formal education and training. Informal learning occurs is acquired in daily life activity, including work-related and voluntary activity, family, or leisure. PLAR is provided primarily by educational institutions, but it can also be provided by industry employers, government, and regulatory bodies.

The promotion of VINFL is expected to support lifelong learning (by promoting flexible educational pathways), and to increase cooperation among European countries on vocational education. The European Guidelines for the Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning (Peer Learning Cluster, 2007) were adopted by the European Council in 2004. The guidelines are intended as, "a set of common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater compatibility between approaches in different countries and at different levels."

Figure 3. From Learning to Certification in Formal and Informal/Non-Formal Learning



Source: created by Jens Bjørnåvold and Mike Coles.

The European Credit Transfer System for VET (ECVET) was developed to give value to learning (predominantly formal) that is achieved in other institutions and outside students' the home country. This tool has the potential to allow the transfer of informal and non-formal learning if the essential elements of comparability and trust are in place. The standardized modes these credit transfer processes use, such as describing learning through defining outcomes (instead of programs), is a powerful mechanism for increasing trust.

Summary

Clearly, what is happening in Europe goes beyond simply "Bologna". It now includes a host of sister initiatives such as Copenhagen and Tuning which are based on Bologna-like principles, but which now extend into a number of areas well beyond Bologna's scope. Though this process began with a simple desire for improved geographic mobility, it has grown to encompass three other key notions: that of quality assessment, that of permeability and that of competency- and outcomes-based assessment

Quality assessment (and specifically, the harmonization of assessment procedures) was central to the creation of a common European Higher Education Area because, bluntly, it was because institutions in different countries did not fully trust one another. If they were going to have to be in the position of automatically accepting credits and credentials from institutions in far away countries as a matter of course, there had to be some sort of external standard of quality control so that every institution could have some assurance about the students they were receiving. This could only be achieved through the adoption of some common form of external quality control. But, it is important to note, this harmonization of quality measures was not an end in itself – rather, it is seen as a tool to enhance mobility and permeability by allowing institutions to have a greater measure of confidence and trust in credits and

credentials issued elsewhere in the system.

While many commentators have described “mobility” as a key goal of Bologna, it seems evident when one looks not just at Bologna but at all the other recent developments in Europe as well, that in fact the goal is “permeability”. This term, as described by Horst Kohler⁸, is about broadening the notion of mobility beyond the geographic. It implies “virtual” mobility through distance education, and it implies temporal mobility through concepts such as life-long learning. But for life-long learning to lead to credentials that are useable in the labour market, discrete units of learning have to be capable of being aggregated into larger degrees – hence the need for the use of credits through ECTS. Permeability also implies that different types of learning be capable of being aggregated in different ways and that there be clear ladders between one set of credentials and another – hence the need for the European Qualifications Framework.

But credits need to be managed in a consistent manner for laddering and mobility to work. If credits are awarded on an inconsistent basis across institutions, then the entire “currency” on which degrees are mutually recognized and arranged in a ladder becomes debauched. In North America, the basis of the currency is time (i.e. hours spent in class) – in Europe, through the Tuning process and increasingly ECTS, the basis of the currency is slowly drifting towards outcomes and competencies. This is a truly unprecedented development in higher education – and one which may have major implications around the world.

⁸ Kohler, H. (2009) *‘Quality’ in European Higher Education*. Paper presented at the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the European Region: Access, Values, Quality and Competitiveness 21-24 May 2009, Bucharest, Romania.

III. Comparing Canada and Europe

Having now looked at Europe, it is worth now putting Canada under similar observation. Given all the major areas of activity in Europe, how does current Canadian practice compare with current European practice? Are Bologna and its sister initiatives really a case of Europe leaping past Canada, or is it simply a case of Europe catching up with Canada?

A Common Education Area

One of the most important points to grasp about Bologna is that all the work around credit transfer, quality assurance, etc is not done simply for its own sake – it is all directed to the greater goals of creating a “common higher education area”. And at this very highest level, Europe is not really breaking any new ground compared to Canada. We already have a common higher education area and have done for decades. In practice, Canada already has a common degree structure, with 3-5 year Bachelor degrees (depending on program), short Master’s programs and longer doctorates – in other words, more or less exactly what Europe is trying so hard to emulate. Bologna, to a very large extent, is really a matter of Europe getting to the place that Canada already is – the difference is that Canada’s common higher education area arose informally, while Europe’s is having to come about through laborious, deliberate adoption of common standards.

That said, there are two areas where the lessons of European experience might usefully be taken on. The first is in vocational education, where the Copenhagen Process shows Europe to be leaping well ahead of Canada. Canada’s jurisdictions, while they have been able to agree to very tight common standards in the skilled trades through the Red Seal Apprenticeship program, have a riot of different college credentials and have never made any serious attempt to make these credentials more portable. Perhaps this is because employers in fact do treat the credentials as equal regardless of where they were granted (implying that in practice a common framework actually does exist); perhaps it is that holders of college credentials are not very mobile and so the question does not arise.

Where it does arise, however, is for the new breed of “bachelor’s degrees” delivered in non-university settings that have been showing up in Canada over the past fifteen years. The experiment really started in British Columbia (though the transformation of many degree-granting colleges into “regional universities” has largely ended this experiment in that province), but has also been in evidence in Alberta and Ontario. Though colleges in these provinces have been legally empowered in certain circumstances to grant degrees (or, in Ontario “associate degrees” though for marketing purposes the first word tends to get dropped), the resulting credentials are usually not seen as equivalent to bachelor’s degrees issued by universities and possession of one rarely is considered an acceptable pre-requisite for admission to graduate studies.

Credit Transfer

As fragmented as the process of credit transfer in Canada may be, credit transfer in Canada is supported by the fact that post-secondary education in Canada utilizes a relatively common system for the calculation of credit. The credit system in Canada is based on inputs, that is, on hours of instruction (also called contact hours). At most institutions, thirty credits are awarded for one fulltime year of study in university or college, based on the completion of five courses in each of two semesters. This is not the only possible system – many institutions make one full year course equal to one credit – but a conversion from

one system to the other is easily done simply by multiplying or dividing by five.

The concept of “knowledge currency”, as it applies to systems of credit transfer was discussed in a paper about credit transfer in Canada by Junor and Usher (2007). Essentially, this view states that if post-secondary education credits are a form of knowledge currency, then institutional Senates can be viewed as performing the role of a central bank. Institutional Senates are legally empowered to establish individualized curricula and graduation requirements. This includes the right to choose not to treat credits (currency) from other institutions as equivalent to their own, when this ensures that credits issued from their institutions conform to certain standards. Moreover, institutions are being encouraged by governments, the private sector and the marketplace to make their own programs and course offerings more distinctive, in order to occupy more individual educational niches. This goal is in conflict with that of total mutual credit recognition, since the nature of niche programs tends to be that they are seamless and integrated; thus, recognition of credits (partial credentials) from other institutions may undermine both the educational content of the program in question and lessen the uniqueness of the credential it confers.

In thinking of each institutional Senate as a central bank issuing credits as its own currency, credit transfer arrangements can then be thought of as analogous to three types of currency exchange. The first is the floating exchange rate. Under this arrangement, institutions establish a value for internal credits and assess external credits on a case-by-case basis. An example of this format is operational in the province of Manitoba, where there is no formal credit transfer body, and students must negotiate with the institution to which they wish to transfer credits. Most Canadian provinces employ a floating credit exchange rate (Table 1 below).

The second type of arrangement is a fixed exchange rate. In this system, the value of a credit is matched to the value of another credit (or combination of credits) at a different institution or institutions, as agreed upon by the participating Institutional Senates. These agreements are often accompanied by the creation of a monitoring agency, which performs one or more of the following three tasks: communicating institutional credit transfer agreements to learners; encouraging institutions to develop policies and practices regarding the transferability of post-secondary credit courses; and examining post-secondary research issues (supply, demand and student mobility) and making recommendations to decision makers on how to best improve the overall efficiency of the system. An example of this system is operational in the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia (see Table 1 below). Throughout these two jurisdictions, institutions have agreed to honour credits at face value.

The final type of credit exchange rate is a pure currency union, where credits are freely exchanged. In Canada, this really exists only within individual post-secondary institutions themselves – that is, departments in post-secondary education institutions will generally honour credits awarded by other departments in the same institution at full value. However, it is precisely this that the ECTS in Europe aspires to be (though, as various Trends reports have noted, actual full implementation of the scheme remains some ways off).

Table 1. University Credit Exchange Rates in Canada and the EU

Jurisdiction	Credit Exchange Rates		
	Floating	Fixed	Currency Union
British Columbia		X	
Alberta		X	
Saskatchewan	X		
Manitoba	X		
Ontario	X	X ⁹	
Quebec	X		
New Brunswick	X		
Nova Scotia	X		
Prince Edward Island	X	X ¹⁰	
Newfoundland and Labrador	X		
Europe			X

In Canada the ability of post-secondary students to transfer credits between institutions differs depending on where they study and where they wish to study. Some Canadian post-secondary students benefit from jurisdictional credit transfer agreements. Alberta and British Columbia students have a much greater ability to transfer credits between institutions in their respective provinces. The transfer arrangements in these provinces have to some extent dealt with the issue of pre-requisite transfer, but not to the same extent as credit transfer. Yukon College has transfer arrangements with all BC universities. In

⁹ Ontario colleges and universities are gradually working to a more integrated system of credit transfer. There is, however, much work to be done in both streams; in many cases, Ontario's system is effectively still a "floating" system.

¹⁰ A series of credit transfer, block transfer and articulated programs have been developed between Prince Edward Island post-secondary institutions and institutions both within and outside of the province.

Saskatchewan and Ontario, there are the makings of credit transfer programs, but these jurisdictions still have much work to do before they reach the level of either Alberta or British Columbia. Students in the remaining Canadian jurisdictions must deal with a series of one-off arrangements between institutions in the various provinces, and there has been no systemic attempt anywhere to deal with the issue of pre-requisite transfer.

The limitations of credit transfer arrangements remain in Canada. In Canada credit transferability is considered challenging because of the number of partners which need to be mobilized in order to develop a solution. Although credit transfer is encouraged centrally, it remains a very localized and, as such, fragmented process. In Canada some policymakers have suggested that anything other than a full currency union – that is, a complete and unhesitating recognition of credits from other institutions – represents a mobility barrier for student transitions between institutions. It is this view that led provincial governments to issue the 1995 Council of Ministers' Protocol on Credit Transfer (also known as the Victoria Accord), which provided for the transfer of first- and second-year university credits among most of Canadian tertiary level institutions. The Council of Ministers later floated the idea of making all university credits transferable across all four years, but this led to a very tepid response from institutions and the idea was for most purposes shelved.

The attempts of Canadian Ministers to make credits transferable stands in stark contrast to those of European ones to do the same. Because there were no common methods of counting credits in Europe, a whole new system had to be created from scratch in many countries. In order to standardize a new system, an elaborate system of equivalencies needed to be created based on student work hours, not contact hours and backed up by an elaborate system of quality assessment. Faced with harmonizing massively different systems, Europeans had to re-think the notion of credits entirely and came up with a system that included effort-based credits and common quality assurance to provide reassurance that a credit at one institution equals a credit somewhere else. Canadian ministers, seeing a system that was relatively similar across the board, simply tried to decree that all credits were equal. The problem, though, is that the institutions in the upper reaches of Canada's implicit university hierarchy do not in fact trust that all credits are equal and the ministerial initiative failed precisely because it provided no such reassurance.

In practice, of course, most universities in Canada do in fact accept at least some of each other's credits for transfer, provided that those credits have been completed within a certain time period, that the final grade meets the institution's minimum grade requirement and – crucially - that they fit within the student's degree program. This, of course, is also true in Europe and it is also why, in practice, even when ECTS becomes fully implemented, the mobility of students there will only be slightly greater than it is in Canada. A degree is not simply a bundle of credits; it is in fact a very specific bundle of credits. When university senates lay down degree requirements for each major, they also specify that certain proportions of classes must be taken in different areas and that a number of very specific classes must be completed. Having the freedom to transfer credits from one institution to another doesn't absolve students of these requirements, and so transfer students will likely always find that taking courses at a new school involves some level of overlap and duplication.

At the college level, Canada does not really have an equivalent to ECVET, and college credits for the most part are very difficult to transfer between provinces (though within provinces there is considerable mobility). However, members of the Association of Canadian Public Polytechnic Institutes signed a separate

Mobility and Transferability Protocol based on the Council of Ministers' Protocol in 2004. Canada's publicly funded colleges have also signed a Mobility and Transferability Pan-Canadian Protocol, under which they agreed to maximize the recognition and transfer of learning acquired through formal education, workplace training, and work, and life experience. Under this protocol, public colleges agreed to base course and program transfer credits on equivalency of educational achievement and of knowledge, skills, abilities, and outcomes. This acknowledges all forms of formal and informal learning such as self-study, workplace education, training, and other life experience.

Quality Assurance

At the institutional level, Canada's quality assurance practices are probably not that different from those in European universities. Certainly, the kinds of institutional program-level self-study are very similar and have probably been going on for longer, on average, in Canada than they have in Europe. Where there are differences between the two sides of the Atlantic emerge is on external quality assurance. In contrast to European states, Canada does not have a national quality assurance regime.¹¹ Some of Canada's provinces/territories have arms' length agencies responsible for quality assurance in higher education, though none are anywhere near as comprehensive as that called for by the emerging European standard.

A number of Canadian jurisdictions do have quality assurance agencies. However, for the most part, these agencies were not set up (as they were in Europe) with the intention of vetting existing university programs. Rather, they were created for the purpose of vetting new degree programs which were being set up by non-university actors (colleges in Alberta and Ontario; university colleges in British Columbia). While some of these boards do vet new programs at universities, for the most part, programs which existed prior to the creation of the board are explicitly grandfathered and are not required to submit to periodic evaluations. Similarly, college programs that are not being offered at the degree level tend to avoid scrutiny from an external quality agency as well.

This does not mean that there is no external evaluation of institutions in Canada – most professional programs do require some periodic program evaluation to which all institutions must submit if they wish to continue offering these programs. But it does mean that there is considerably less of it going on in Canada than in Europe. Generally speaking, Canadian governments have appeared satisfied with institutions' internal quality controls, and have as a result chosen not to subject them to external oversight. While this might actually be taken as a sign of high institutional quality, with no external body to certify it, Canadian institutions paradoxically have no way to prove their quality in a way that Europeans would necessarily understand or recognize.

The Tuning Process

The harmonization of program-level outcomes around widely agreed-upon competencies is not an area where Canadian institutions can be said to be doing anything significant. It is an area where Europeans are unequivocally jumping ahead of Canada. That said, it is not as though Canadians are incapable of this kind of approach to education. In fact, Canada has had a Tuning-like approach to education in the skilled trades for many years. In practice, the way the Red Seal apprenticeship program has been developed

¹¹ That said, although it is slightly contentious to describe it as such, membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada requires meeting a test of institutional standards which strongly resembles an accreditation process.

is very similar to the Tuning process. Clearly, the country does have the capacity to bring provinces and institutions together at common tables to come up with common outcomes should it choose to do so; however, common outcomes have clearly been a higher priority in trades education than elsewhere.

Qualifications Frameworks

We have already noted that prior to 2008, Europe just had a framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. In that year, however, The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning was adopted which provides an all-encompassing outcomes-based framework for post-secondary qualifications in all sectors of education and training (VET and higher education).

Though it has not been widely publicized, Canada too has a framework, known as the Canadian Degree Level Qualifications Framework.¹² This is not an especially complicated document; it merely sets out what kinds of standards are expected in courses leading to Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees. Left undefined in the framework are precisely those designations which are proving problematic, such as the "applied degrees". In other words, what Canada's framework does is essentially codify the existing understandings of the Canadian Higher Education Area as it existed say, fifteen years ago, while the difficult questions about newer qualifications are ignored.

Given the difficulty that provinces have had in dealing with newer qualifications in higher education, it should not come as a surprise that Canada has nothing at the national level resembling Europe's Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. However, Ontario has developed a very detailed 13-level framework for its own purposes which is reasonably similar to the European model.¹³

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is the name given to the process of recognizing informal and non-formal learning for academic recognition, academic credit or credentialing in Canada. PLAR is being used with increasing frequency in Canada to assess the prior learning of internationally qualified newcomers to Canada and settled Canadians (CMEC, 2007c). However, access to PLAR is still fairly limited in Canada and there are tremendous inconsistencies in its provision. The Canadian Alliance of Education and Training Organizations (CAETO, 2004) has argued that the lack of collaboration and coordination of assessment processes and procedures by employers, regulatory bodies, certifying bodies and academic institutions contributes to inconsistencies in the recognition of prior learning. The Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (2005) has therefore recommended the following:

- that clear definitions, standards and assessment practices based on that collaboration between post-secondary institutions and industry be developed;
- that staff with clear responsibilities for delivering PLAR be designated and developed;
- that a shift to outcome-based curriculum planning be adopted, since outcomes (what students learn as opposed to what teachers teach) provide useful tools to demonstrate learning and articulating transfer credits between institutions.

Canada lacks a common agreement on standards and guidelines and a monitoring body to ensure the

¹² The Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework can be viewed online at: <http://www.caqc.gov.ab.ca/pdfs/CDQF-FINAL.pdf>

¹³ The Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF) can be viewed online on the website of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/postsec/oqf.html>

consistent provision of PLAR. Policies, procedures, and supports have to date been developed primarily within individual post-secondary institutions. In the unregulated occupations, standardized methods and common tools for the assessment of occupational competencies for use Canada-wide are frequently lacking. Where assessment tools have been developed, there are no arrangements to share them systematically. This is again because the responsibility for the development and delivery of PLAR has fallen to individual institutions. The result has been that services to provide PLAR are uncoordinated within institutions, non-standardized, and unevenly distributed across the country. To the extent that post-secondary institutions shift to an outcomes-based approach to education which identifies the competencies that students are expected to acquire through the completion of courses/programs, there is likely to be increased emphasis on PLAR as a means of recognizing learning.

Similar to Europe, vocational or professional subjects show the most demand for the recognition of prior learning from applicants in Canada. It is typical that validation is introduced in vocational or adult education and taken up gradually in other sectors such as higher education. However, in the recognition of prior learning, Canada is lagging behind Europe in significant ways. The level of PLAR activity in Europe far exceeds that in Canada; increasing numbers of individuals in European countries are benefiting from the validation of informal and non-formal learning. A few European countries have implemented ‘universal’ validation methodologies that apply to all forms of learning and all types of qualifications. Unlike Europe, Canada is without national guidelines to ensure a standardized process for the recognition of prior learning and a national agency empowered to ensure the consistency and transparency of PLAR delivery across sectors and providers. Finally, Europe is significantly ahead of Canada in its development of tools that convert competencies into credits.

Summary

In the area that started the whole Bologna process – that of having a common degree structure and “common higher education area” – it can in most respects be said that Canada has very little to learn from Bologna. Give or take an associate bachelor’s degree or two, Canada already had a common higher education area and degree structure. Therefore, from one perspective, all the tremendous work that Europe has undertaken in credit transfer, quality assessment, etc, is just a really long, laborious and tortuous way of getting to where Canada already is and so probably just represents a case of “catch-up”. Perhaps. But it also needs to be acknowledged that the long and laborious tasks involved in creating the common higher education area have some intrinsic value beyond the most immediate implications of its creation. Unlike Canada, Europe can claim to have really begun a profound re-think of how degrees are delivered by measuring progress through student work effort rather than contact hours and, by being explicit about outcomes, are on their way to making laddering between qualifications much easier. It can also claim a much more extensive network of external quality assessment stretching across all program offerings. To the degree that these things are considered desirable, then Bologna and its sister processes are putting Europe “ahead”. This is particularly true when it comes to vocational education – arguably Canada needs to pay more attention to the Copenhagen process and ECVET because of the way they focus on vocational educational mobility and on creating the conditions for laddering between different levels of education, because it is in this area that the biggest gap between Europe and Canada seems to be emerging.

The question, of course, is whether or not any of this matters. Do credit transfer and quality assessment policies a continent away really have any relevance to Canadian higher education? We will address this question in our third and final section.

IV. The Relevance of Bologna to Canada

We have already examined the differences between Canada and Europe in those areas of post-secondary education that are most affected by the Bologna process and its related initiatives. In this section, we will ask two final questions: what lessons does Europe hold for improving educational mobility in Canada, and how will Bologna shape the global educational framework in which Canadian institutions compete?

Lessons for Mobility and Transferability

Though it is rarely top of mind among educational policymakers, student mobility is nevertheless a perennial issue among in Canadian higher education policy. What lessons does Bologna have for our policy makers?

The key lesson from the European experience that is that perfect mobility requires, among other things, that one's prior learning – be it in the form of full educational credentials (e.g. degrees), partial educational credentials (e.g. credits) or experiential learning – be properly recognized. Prior learning recognition cannot be created by fiat: it requires understanding and trust. That is, first, an understanding of what learning has been undertaken, and second, trust that whoever has been overseeing the learning and has issued a credential or credits is a serious and reputable institution which has ensured that the stated learning has indeed taken place. Without this understanding and trust, there can be no “system” of mobility; only patchworks of circumstance. In practice, “understanding” has meant the creation of common frameworks for issuing and describing learning and credentials, and “trust” has meant the creation of agencies that guarantee the quality of degrees and credentials earned in various places. These frameworks and agencies look a little different from place to place and sector to sector, and mean slightly different things in the labour market than they do in education, but basically this is true across the board.

Canadian approaches to this problem have never proceeded on this basis and this, bluntly, is why they have failed. Take the Council of Ministers' attempt to have all credits made transferable across the country: essentially, the ministers attempted to do this by fiat. No attempt was made to try to engage institutions in a discussion of what would constitute acceptable measures of equivalency. It is the same with “applied degrees” and other means of delivering degree programs in non-university settings (Marshall, 2004a, 2004b, 2005/2006, 2006); provincial governments have tended simply to set these up and expect that the system will somehow adjust. But without trust and understanding (which new programs, by virtue of being new, are lacking) these educational experiments are more or less doomed: in British Columbia, the move to turn degree-granting university colleges into fully fledged universities was essentially an admission that only a shift in institutional status could bring their degrees the trust and understanding (and hence external recognition) they deserved.

This is not to say that Canada needs to adopt European methods in order to obtain the necessary trust and understanding between key actors. The path to greater student mobility and more efficient ladder-ing in Canada does not necessarily lie in European-style quality assurance regimes. But more attention needs to be paid to this issue. Governments cannot expect to make policy on their own in this area; new pan-Canadian forums need to be created that can allow institutions and governments to discuss these issues in a constructive fashion.

Global Implications of Bologna

The creation of a continental higher education area does not, of itself, necessarily entail much of a shake-up in global education. But, taken in their totality, Bologna and its sister processes of Copenhagen, Tuning, etc. represent quite a formidable shift in the way higher education is delivered. It's about re-designing an entire system of education around the notions of permeability, quality assessment, and a shift to outcomes-based assessment. Bologna isn't just about credit transfer, even less (as some Canadian commentators keep feverishly thinking) about a supra-national system of governance. It's actually a wholesale re-think of the delivery of post-secondary programs and the way quality is assessed within them.¹⁴

The Tuning Project's promotion of a competency-based approach to curriculum development in higher education reflects a shift that is considered essential to promote lifelong learning and the recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Europe, priorities that are also considered important in Canada's efforts to build its labour force. The shift in Europe towards the definition of learning outcomes as competencies has further lessons to offer related to the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. The development of tools to convert non-formal learning that is recognized as equivalent to competencies into credits that can then be accumulated and transferred towards a credential, represents a breakthrough for VINFL in Europe.

None of this should immediately pose a challenge to Canadian higher education. The fact that our country lacks the specific structural mechanisms the Europeans have to demonstrate quality or describe outcomes does not mean that Canadian institutions lack quality or have poor outcomes. It just means that we cannot "prove" that we have quality in the way the Europeans do.

But external forces may begin pushing Canadian post-secondary institutions in the direction of Bologna very soon. The most obvious spur to change in the short term would be the successful conclusion of the present Canada – EU Free Trade talks which were launched in the fall of 2008. The deal envisaged under these talks, unlike the Free Trade Agreement and North American Free Trade Agreement, are designed not only to ensure free trade in goods between Canada and Europe but also to ensure the free movement of skilled labour between the two. As we have already seen, labour mobility within the EU rests in large part on mutual recognition of credentials as provided for through Bologna. The likelihood therefore is that for Canadians to actually benefit from such a labour mobility provision in the new free trade agreement, it will be necessary to undertake some kind of harmonization with the Bologna process.

The other possible global spur would come if the broad European approach to higher education goes on to become a more global standard. This is a distinct possibility. The European approach to quality assessment – so absent in Canada – is gaining adherents all over the world. The Tuning project is no longer restricted to a few disciplines in Europe – there is also a growing Latin American Tuning project and in April 2009, the Lumina Foundation began sponsoring a Tuning project in the United States as well.

If European quality assurance practices and European outcomes-based assessment approaches do become global standards (and with the spread of Tuning, they may well be doing just that), then countries whose systems do not obey these norms are effectively going to be orphans within the global system.

¹⁴ Tuning college degrees. Inside Higher Education, April 8, 2009 <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/04/08/tuning>

These run the risk of their degrees being considered second-class or not equivalent in countries that are part of the dominant system. This could mean that a bachelor's degree from a Canadian institution might not automatically be accepted for a Master's program abroad. That would have dramatic implications for Canadians who want to do graduate work abroad; the implications for international education in Canada and our ability to attract foreign students would be nothing short of catastrophic. It is likely that this threat, in the end, will bring Canadian policymakers to start looking seriously at Bologna and its sister processes and might bring us to look more seriously at quality assessment and outcomes-based assessment.

But if Canadian institutions are to do this, they will need some new forums in which to do so. To achieve the kinds of changes that a Bologna/Copenhagen/Tuning-compliant system would require, intense and continuing dialogue is needed between governments, institutions and stakeholders. Yet there are no forums in Canada to support the sustained dialogue among jurisdictions that could lead to major changes in the post-secondary system on a pan-Canadian scale. Historically, Canadian higher education institutions have rarely had to make policy on substantive issues like quality assurance and outcomes assessment on an overt and pan-Canadian basis, and certainly not in a process which includes governments, faculty, and students in the kind of open co-ordination process used in Europe. However, should the pressure to adopt Bologna-like standards continue to grow, it is exactly this kind of process which will be required in order for Canada to make the necessary adjustments to safeguard its international position.

Of all the implications Bologna has for Canada, it is this one – the need to find better ways to for higher education stakeholders to engage with one another at a pan-Canadian level – that is perhaps the most profound. Bologna will almost certainly challenge us to find new ways to work co-operatively to improve our common system of higher education. It is a challenge that should be welcomed rather than resisted.

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Appendix A European Level Agreements

Lisbon Recognition Convention, 1997

The Council of Europe and UNESCO adopted the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European.

Sorbonne Declaration, 1998

France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Germany accepted a common undergraduate and graduate degree framework, an open European higher education area, and common recognition of qualifications to enable student and teacher mobility.

Bologna Declaration, 1999

This declaration provided the basis for establishing a European Higher Education area by 2010. Elements included a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, a two-cycle degree structure, a system of credits (ECTS), promotion of mobility, cooperation in quality assurance, and promotion of European dimensions in higher education. Twenty-nine ministers of education were signatories to the agreement.

Lisbon Agenda/Strategy, 2000

This strategy embodies a commitment by European Council and Heads of State to modernize Europe and make the European Union the most competitive economy in the world and achieving full employment by 2010. The strategy was revisited and relaunched in 2005.

Prague Communiqué, 2001

Ministers of higher education in 33 European countries agreed to commit to the objectives of the Bologna Declaration, to enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA to other parts of the world, and to emphasizing lifelong learning and student involvement. The involvement of the European University Association and National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) was secured.

Barcelona Mandate, 2002

Under the Barcelona Mandate, the European Commission called for European education and training to become a world quality reference by 2010. Furthermore, action was called for to introduce measures to support action similar to the Bologna-process, adapted to the field of vocational education and training.

The Copenhagen Declaration, 2002

This resolution called for the joint effort to promote increased cooperation in vocational education and training in Europe. Linkages would be developed between the Bologna Process and the Copenhagen Process, to enable transparency of qualifications, common systems of credit transfer, and quality assurance.

Berlin Communiqué, 2003

Bologna signatories agreed to a common quality assurance system, promotion of the two-cycle degree system, development of an overarching framework of qualifications for the EHEA, and recognition of degrees and study periods supported by the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Diploma supplement.

Bergen Communiqué 2005

The forty-five signatories to Bologna agreed to the central role of higher education in implementing Bologna, the adoption of a 3-cycle higher education framework with descriptors based on learning outcomes and competencies, and to the development of compatible national-level qualifications frameworks. Credit ranges were agreed on for the first and second cycles, and the standards and guidelines for quality assurance of the European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA) were approved. Commitments were made to mutual recognition and lifelong learning and to ensuring higher education institutions have the autonomy and funding necessary to carry out reforms.



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