

Observations on the United States as Stakeholder in the Bologna Process

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As Stanford University economist Paul Romer has long argued, great advances have always come from ideas. Ideas do not fall from the sky; they come from people. People write software. People design products. People start the new businesses. Every new thing that gives us pleasure or productivity or convenience... is the result of human ingenuity. – R. Florida

Whether as immigrants or temporarily as students, scholars or researchers, the United States has long received many benefits from people from other countries coming to the U.S. Indeed, the U.S. owes its development as a nation to people from other countries and since the mid nineteenth century, the U.S. has been dependent on immigrant labor for much of its economic success. Some argue that the ability of the United States to be a center of ingenuity and invention has been its openness to new ideas, especially in scientific fields, the arts, and entertainment. That openness in turn has fostered the research and development that has been a major economic engine and made the U.S. a magnet for the world's best and brightest. But today there are clear indicators that the best and the brightest are looking at other parts of the globe as the incubators of new ideas. At the end of the day, the higher education community in the U.S. will view itself as a stakeholder in the Bologna Process to the degree to which the United States is able to keep its doors open to students from other countries. There are challenges to keeping the doors open. This article takes a look at those challenges.

Post-Secondary Education in the United States

Post-secondary academic and professional education in the United States is primarily offered in two types of institutions, colleges and universities. At the undergraduate level (the level leading to a bachelor's degree) and in terms of program of study, there is no distinction between a college and a university. Both offer programs of study leading to the bachelor's degree. Distinctions between a college and a university are generally a matter of the size of the institution (number of students and faculty) and that universities also offer graduate degrees, the master's degree and the doctoral degree, although not all universities offer programs of study leading to the Ph.D. However, the distinctions in name can be confusing. For example Denison University in Ohio offers no graduate degrees and carries the name university as an historical appellation, not as an indicator that Denison University offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees.

To add to the complexity just a little, a community college differs from a college in that the community college offers among a variety of programs of study, an academic program of study leading to an associate degree. In many cases, the associate degree program of study at a community college will have an articulation agreement with a college or university in the region where the community college is located that enables a student to transfer credit from the associate degree program to a program of study leading to a bachelor's degree.

Recognition of Academic Qualifications

The organizational features of academic post-secondary education in the U.S. point to another feature of post-secondary or higher education in the United States. Whether public or private, there is no centralized national government entity with authority for education in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education is not our ministry of education. The absence of a federal educational authority is due in large part to the absence of education being mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. With no federal education authority or ministry of education in the United States, institutions of higher education are autonomous. The control and authority rests with the institutions themselves or in some cases with individual states, as is generally the case of public state institutions, although public state institutions are still autonomous. This feature of higher education in the United States is reflected in Article II of the Lisbon Convention, where the competent authority in matters pertaining to the recognition of academic qualifications lies with the institution and not national or regional government authorities.

With no national authority in education, a critical component of post-secondary education in the U.S. that establishes the framework for standard setting and a high degree uniformity in the organization and recognition of degrees offered at institutions is the system of institutional and program accreditation. The general public tends to be captivated by the highly subjective and “public relations/marketing” orientation of the ranking of institutions in the U.S. However, the objective core of an institution’s standards, quality control, and assessment of an institution’s ability to deliver the education reflected in its mission statement is its institutional accreditation by one of the regional accrediting bodies and the program accreditation by one of the professional accrediting bodies such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET).

Although there is no central federal authority and therefore no government authority in matters of recognition of academic qualifications, until December of 1968 the U.S. Office of Education (predecessor of the U.S. Department of Education) did provide guidance in the evaluation of foreign educational credentials to assist institutions in the process of admitting students from other countries to institutions in the U.S. However, the opinions expressed were offered as advice, not as governmental decisions or policies.

The National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials

In the mid 1950s, a committee was formed with representation from the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, the Association of American Colleges, the Association of Graduate Schools, the Institute of International Education, and the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors, and with observers from the following: the American Council on Education, Commission on Education and International Affairs, the College Entrance Examination Board, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Office of Education. That committee became the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials. Since its founding in the 1950s, the role of the Council has been to provide guidelines through providing Council recommendations for the interpretation of foreign academic credentials for the purpose of placement in educational and other institutions in the United States. The following taken from a 1958 report on education in Korea reveals the mission and purpose of the Council.

The Committee felt a need for coordinating the opinion of all groups interested in the placement of foreign students, so its first act was to arrange meetings which resulted in the organization of a Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Student Credentials...(the) Committee invited individuals on United States campuses to prepare factual reports on educational developments in various countries....These reports, while in manuscript, are reviewed by the Council on Evaluation and the Council incorporates into each report recommendations regarding academic placement of foreign students coming into United States educational institutions.

The following report on the Republic of Korea is intended to help admissions officers to arrive at their own decisions on proper and equitable placement of individual students. Admissions officers should, of course, give due consideration to the purposes, organization, and requirements of their own institutions, and to the academic and personal needs of each student concerned. – *The Republic of Korea, 1958.*

Although there have been many changes since its creation in 1955, the Council maintains its unique role as the only inter-associational body in the United States offering standards for interpreting foreign educational credentials and for the purpose of assisting educational institutions in admitting and placing students primarily in academic programs of study. However, it is important to underscore that the recommendations of the Council are provided as advisory opinions, the Council's recommendations are not statements of national policy and some of the recommendations of the Council have not been without controversy.

Multiple Opinions

Another dimension of the evaluation of foreign academic credentials in the United States is the role played by private credential evaluation services. Many institutions, employers, professional bodies, as well as government agencies rely on the resources, analysis and opinions offered by the private credential evaluation services. And recently, a national education association, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO), has started its own credential evaluation service. While many of these credential evaluation services offer opinions that are frequently backed by comprehensive and focused research, like the recommendations of the Council, the opinions and evaluations offered are advisory and are not statements of national policy.

The array of opinions and practices in the United States, the absence of a federal authority, policy, or voice in matters concerning the evaluation and recognition of academic qualifications from other countries can be very confusing when viewed from outside the United States. In addition, the autonomy of institutions in making decisions (or adopting the opinions of other entities, be they the recommendations of the Council or the opinion of a private credential evaluation service) does lead to widely varying practices and positions when it comes to the issue of evaluating education from other countries. This is a challenge that will influence the assessment of the new degrees in Europe by institutions in the U.S. Indeed, the diversity in the evaluation of foreign educational credential has always been a

challenge in the United States and the main motivation for the creation the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credential in 1955.

Assessment of the New Degrees in Europe

As noted, there are multiple voices and perspectives in matters of recognition and the evaluation of academic credentials in the United States. There is no national authority that sets policy. Institutions are completely autonomous in making assessments about credentials from other countries. It is fully anticipated that there will be multiple opinions and decisions about the new degrees initiated under the Bologna Process. Some institutions may adopt the position that the new bachelor's degree representing three years of study cannot be viewed as equivalent to a four-year bachelor's degree. Other institutions may adopt the view that the new bachelor's degree can be viewed as appropriate preparation for admission to graduate-level studies at their institution. Other institutions may adopt entirely different views.

One thing is certain, that there will be multiple opinions and perspectives in the United States regarding the new degrees. This multiplicity of opinions and perspectives will be a challenge as we attempt to maintain the flow of ideas through the mobility of students, scholars, researchers, and faculty.

It is anticipated that the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials will review manuscripts detailing the new degrees initiated under the Bologna Process. How the Council will view the new degrees cannot be anticipated. Regardless, the Council's recommendation will not be a mandate for institutions. Some institutions will reflect on the Council's recommendations and them into consideration when making assessments. Other institutions will go in other directions. The multiplicity of opinions and actions based on those opinions has always been a challenge and will continue to be a challenge.

The Repercussions of Terrorism

People around the world applaud America's efforts to improve its own security. But what the world does not like is the arbitrary and sometimes brash methods the country has adopted in its own defense. – R. Florida

The United States likes to think of itself as a "melting pot" of ethnicities and cultures. However, we are reluctant to admit the xenophobia that has laced our history as a country. To cite just two examples, the anti-German sentiment in the United States during World War I manifested itself in ways ranging from a general dislike of anything or anyone of German heritage to the policy issued by President Wilson in 1917 that required all German males fourteen and older not naturalized to register as alien enemies by February 4, 1918. The internment of Japanese-American citizens during World War II is another example. There are many more examples throughout the history of the United States that reveal this disturbing aspect of the American character.

To the credit of the current administration, the public was asked not to turn the acts of terrorism of September 11, 2001 into a religious war on Islam in the United States. Nevertheless, in the wake of the attacks on the U.S., individuals in the U.S. of Middle

Eastern ancestry have felt an extreme tension, if not harassment. The changes in policy ranging from the implementation of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) and visa application fees to the interview process and fingerprinting of those who enter the U.S. are presenting the U.S. as unwelcoming, if not hostile.

What many view as the restrictive policies put in place nominally in the interest of national security combined with the latent and overt xenophobia in the United States present a challenge to attracting people from other countries. The concern expressed by some is that the United States will not be able to recover its position of preeminence in education and research once the “war on terrorism” is over. Putting out the welcome mat once again will not signal the return of the flow of students, scholars, and talent to the United States. Some have predicted that a seriously diminished flow of students, scholars, and talent to the United States will have far-reaching and long-lasting negative consequences for the United States.

Opportunities and Challenges

The climate that emerged in the United States in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 is only one factor that will influence the decision of individuals to look elsewhere in the world for opportunities. Today, there are opportunities in many other countries. The internet and the globalization of information and higher education are enabling individuals and institutions to have access to information and resources only dreamed of a few years ago. The sharing of ideas is no longer limited to place. Educational and research opportunities that were viewed as mainly available only in the United States are now available in other countries.

Institutions in the U.S. see themselves as competing with each other for the best and brightest. In addition, with no federal authority for education, there has been no collective national agenda or coordinated effort in matters relating to the process of attracting students from other countries. By contrast, institutions in other countries are relying on “umbrella organizations” to promote all of the institutions in their country through various means making it easier for students to apply to institutions in their countries.

In the absence of a clear and strong national voice or infrastructure, there is no mechanism in place for the U.S. higher education community to speak with a collective voice and to influence the decisions of the government that impact the flow of international students and scholars to the United States. Organizations such as NAFSA: Association of International Educators have been successful at times in influencing policies and procedures, but overall there is no strong collective voice raising concerns on behalf of the higher education community. The lack of a clear voice will be another challenge to be faced.

Looking to the Future

These observations on the present state of international educational exchange in the United States paint a bleak picture for the future. In light of the challenges facing the United States, it is hard to be optimistic. However, if the decisions regarding the assessment of the new degrees in Europe are carefully and deliberately made in the context of keeping the doors open, how the new degrees are viewed may be an important first step. Continued dialogue and sharing of information will also contribute to keeping the doors open. And finally, the

United States needs to be reminded that it is people who have been the source of new ideas and new ideas are the hope of the future.

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