



Guest Editorial

## Bologna and Beyond: The Future of Higher Education in the United States?

Scott L. Karakas, PhD<sup>1</sup>

1. Director of General Education, Florida Gulf Coast University, 10501 FGCU Boulevard South, Fort Myers, FL, 33965-6565, USA, Email: skarakas@fgcu.edu

Higher education in America is currently at a crossroads. During the past 100 years, the United States (US) postsecondary education system has enjoyed a very high reputation internationally, and our elite research universities continue to attract many of the world's finest minds. Yet in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is becoming apparent that a rapidly-changing world has highlighted some serious issues within the system. In a time of economic hardship, state funding for higher education has fallen while college tuition and fees have continued to rise sharply, putting an ever-increasing burden of debt upon college students and their families (1). As a result, American postsecondary education has come under increasingly critical scrutiny, with growing concerns expressed over college completion rates, student performance, accountability, access, affordability, and the value of academic degrees.

In his 2006 book entitled *Our Underachieving Colleges*, former Harvard University President Derek Bok posited that American college students in general improve far less than they should in key areas such as writing, critical thinking, quantitative skills, and moral reasoning (2). This was reinforced by sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roska in their 2011 book *Academically Adrift*, in which a sample group of students from a wide variety of different institutions showed no significant improvement in critical thinking skills after four years of collegiate study (3). Other scholars have produced exciting new research about how the mind works, suggesting new and more effective teaching practices (4). However, these new ideas have yet to find wide circulation in college classrooms, where a majority of faculty members continue to teach in much the same ways that they were taught back in graduate school.

While US higher education has been coming under increasingly critical scrutiny in recent years, significant reform movements, most notably the Bologna Process, have been under way in Europe, Australia, Africa, Latin America and Asia. The Bologna Process is named for the city that is home to Europe's oldest university, where twenty-nine national education ministers first met in 1999 and declared their support for a voluntary process for the comprehensive reform of higher education across Europe. This process was initially designed to enhance quality assurance, competitiveness, and attractiveness for European higher education by creating a greater degree of "harmonization" and "convergence" through the development of common reference points and operating procedures among the participating higher education systems, along with the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that would transcend academic borders in much the same way that the European Union (EU) has served as a vehicle for coordinating national economic policies and dissolving economic borders (5).

In the twelve years following the original Bologna Declaration, the EHEA has grown to encompass forty-seven member countries, affecting some 4000 institutions and sixteen million students. The Bologna Process has initiated a fundamental transformation of higher education throughout Europe, centered on the development of a uniform structure consisting of a 3-year baccalaureate, 2-year master's degree, and terminal doctorate. Other important features include a discipline-based Tuning Project for the development of qualifications frameworks documenting the expected learning outcomes for a given qualification and how the various qualifications in the higher education system interact, a European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) that, in conjunction with outcomes-based qualifications frameworks, is designed to render

academic programs and qualifications more transparent and to facilitate the recognition of qualifications across institutions, and a Diploma Supplement designed to accompany a higher education diploma, providing a standardized description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies completed by its holder (6).

The Bologna Process agenda has been a very ambitious one, and results to date have been decidedly mixed. Implementation of the agenda items among participating member institutions of the EHEA have been far from consistent, with some apparently doing little more than re-branding their existing programs and degrees. Some governments have been accused of using the Bologna Process as a cover for controversial and unrelated initiatives, most notably reductions in higher education funding and sharp increases in tuitions. And while the European Students' Union (ESU) has strongly endorsed the Bologna Process, its members have also raised serious concerns over issues of access, accountability and lack of progress hidden within favorable reports, while persistently drawing attention to the social dimensions of the process. The recent sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone has also raised serious doubts about the viability of the EU and related collective entities.

In spite of these difficulties, the Bologna Process and the EHEA appear to have made significant progress throughout Europe, and the original ten-year agenda has been extended through 2020 (7). Bologna-inspired initiatives are also currently underway in Latin America, Africa and Australia, and institutions in Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Malaysia have invested heavily in improving their own higher education systems. As discussed above, this increasingly competitive global educational market is developing at the same time as the cost and value of US higher education are coming under increasingly critical scrutiny. In April of 2009, Clifford Adelman, Senior Associate with the Institute for Higher Education Policy, produced a study sponsored by the Lumina Foundation for Education, which examined the Bologna Process in detail, and suggested that the US adopt a similar process for its own higher education system (8). In his 2010 book *The Challenge of Bologna*, Professor Paul L. Gaston offered a number of suggestions for ways in which the American higher education system could benefit from lessons learned, both positive and negative, during development and implementation of the Bologna Process.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the Bologna Process and other such initiatives constitute a significant challenge to US postsecondary education. At the same time, they also provide an opportunity for American higher education to grow and adapt in the light of new economic realities, rapid technological changes, and our increased understanding of how people learn. In this thematic issue of *Synesis*, we explore potential US responses to the Bologna Process and other international higher education initiatives, with the goal of identifying important emerging economic, technological, and social forces that are likely to influence the development of higher education systems in the US and abroad. We also discuss several key strengths and areas for improvement within the American higher education system, with a particular focus on the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, and we explore a number of potential solutions, reforms and innovations in policy, administration, training, pedagogy, and technology that could substantively enhance the quality of postsecondary education in the US.

With this section of *Synesis*, together with a related program of workshops, the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies hopes to develop a collaborative group of policy-makers, administrators, educators, and scholars that will elucidate a number of recommended "best practice" policies to promote US student success in higher education, define and clarify standards of academic achievement, increase access and mobility, and enhance the qualifications of graduates in the workforce and as citizens in a democratic society.

#### **Disclaimer**

There was no external funding in the preparation of this manuscript.

#### **Competing interests**

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

#### **References**

1. Massy WF. Honoring the trust: quality and cost containment in higher education. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing; 2003.
2. Bok DC. Our underachieving colleges: a candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; 2006.

3. Arum R, Roksa J. *Academically adrift: limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2011.
4. Bransford J. *How people learn: brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 2000.
5. Bologna - Berlin 2003 [Internet]. Berlin: Summit on Higher Education; c1998-2003 [updated 2003 Oct 14; cited 2011 Dec 29]. Available from: <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/en/basic/index.htm>.
6. Bologna Process - European Higher Education Area Official Website 2007-2010 [Internet]. Brussels: Benelux Bologna Secretariat; c2007-2010 [updated 2010 June 30; cited 2011 Dec 29]. Available from: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>.
7. Bologna Process - European Higher Education Area Official Website 2010-2012 [Internet]. Bucharest: Bologna Follow-Up Group Secretariat; c2010-2012 [updated 2011 Nov 29; cited 2011 Dec 29]. Available from: <http://www.ehea.info/>.
8. Adelman C. *The Bologna process for U.S. eyes re-learning higher education in the age of convergence* [Internet]. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy; 2009 [cited 2011 Dec 29]. Available from: <http://bibpurl.oclc.org/web/35319>