

Background on the Bologna Process

The Bologna Declaration was issued following a meeting of the European Ministers of Education held in Bologna in 1999, and set into motion a “process” (thus the Bologna Process) aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. To achieve this goal, the Declaration called for the following:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
- Adoption of a degree structure based on two main cycles (undergraduate and graduate)
- Adoption of a system of credits (to enable students to transfer and accumulate credits)
- Elimination of obstacles that impede mobility of students and job seekers
- Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance

Hence, the long term objectives of the reforms outlined in the Bologna Process are essentially threefold:

- 1) To facilitate the speedy entrance of educated professionals into the job market through shortened degrees.
- 2) To enhance the cross-border mobility of students and job seekers.
- 3) To increase the competitiveness of European higher education internationally.

Most of the 45 countries currently participating in the Bologna Process have adopted a structure that awards a three-year bachelor's degree followed by a two-year master's degree.

Scope of the Bologna Process

The Bologna Process is a massive undertaking that encompasses most of Europe, and continues to expand geographically picking up new member states at each ministerial meeting.

Originally, there were 29 signatory countries to the Bologna Declaration. With Russia's membership, the Bologna Process now (2006) includes 45 countries and literally stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific. When it is completed in 2010, the EHEA will include over 12 million students and 4,000 universities across Europe. An educational reform movement on such a grand scale has never before been attempted in Europe, or elsewhere for that matter.

Primary Difference Between Three-Year European and Four-Year U.S. Baccalaureate Degrees

As a general rule, European three-year degrees are more heavily concentrated in the major—or specialization—and that the general education component which is so crucial to U.S. undergraduate education is absent. General education is done at upper secondary levels in European style systems, hence electives or additional breadth requirements are not embraced at the baccalaureate level.

Many U.S. graduate schools have come to accept three-year degrees if the applicant finished primary/secondary schooling in a system that required 13 years (i.e., UK) rather than the 12 years common in other European countries (i.e., France).

Sampling of Arguments for Accepting European Three-Year Degrees as Equivalent to (U.S.) Four-Year Bachelor Degrees

- The year that is missing for most European students isn't a “senior year,” but more likely material that would have been covered in a “freshmen year.” As such, while European bachelor degrees do not include U.S.-style general education components, they have solid core curriculum (“majors”) that typically exceed the content and rigor covered in U.S. programs.
- There is too much diversity in the quality of American higher education to make any blanket comparisons between European and American degrees. In Europe a “top” university isn't likely that different from a “less prestigious” institution. Hence, a graduate from a “less prestigious” European program is likely to be more qualified than many applicants from U.S. schools.
- Why reject applicants if their record indicates that they have achieved the same skills and level of knowledge as their U.S. counterparts, and would very likely succeed at the graduate level?

Sampling of Arguments for Rejecting European Three-Year Degrees as Equivalent to (U.S.) Four-Year Bachelor Degrees

- Is it fair to require that a stellar U.S. student who has completed three years at a selective U.S. university (e.g., UW-Madison) complete another year of schooling to earn a baccalaureate degree before being considered for admission if they are as, if not more, academically qualified than the European applicant who was only required to complete three years?

Sources

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