

## Want world class higher education?

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Six provinces have received comprehensive reports from advisers and commissions on the future of postsecondary education since 2005. So far, there is no sign of a revolution. Meanwhile, in Europe, the Bologna Process has triggered a wave of reforms designed to increase the compatibility and comparability of higher education systems. The goal is a European Higher Education Area by 2010.

The provincial reviews were triggered by two concerns: first, an understanding that postsecondary education is central to provincial competitiveness; second, emerging evidence that Canada is lagging other jurisdictions such as Australia; and third, a worry that Canadian institutions are falling short in meeting domestic demands for access, quality and system planning.

All six reviews called for greater integration of university and college systems within the province – Ontario and Newfoundland and Labrador issued reports in 2005, Alberta in 2006, and British Columbia, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan in 2007. But there was nary a word about cross-Canada integration. That is what makes the Bologna Process so interesting.

In June, 1999, ministers of higher education from 29 European countries (17 more joined the process later) issued the Bologna Declaration, saying they would work together to achieve international competitiveness of higher education and to facilitate the mobility of students, graduates and faculty. Work has progressed, with the full co-operation of European universities. The process is voluntary – there is no directive from the European Union. But there is a lot of peer pressure.

The ministers first agreed to establish Europe-wide frameworks that would guide decisions in each country to create:

Comparable bachelor, master and doctoral degrees.

Standards and guidelines for quality assurance.

A system for accumulating and transferring course credits.

Fair recognition of foreign degrees and other qualifications.

Then, to show they were serious, they set up a “stocktaking” process. Countries prepare their own self-evaluation every two years, using a common template of goals, objectives and indicators. This is then “peer-reviewed” by a group of international experts who have developed a carefully defined scoring system.

The 2007 stocktaking report to ministers concluded that the outlook for reaching the 2010 targets was good. For example, 17 countries now have a fully operational quality assurance system in line with European standards and 26 are in the process of implementing such a system.

One has to admire both the ambition of the European ministers of education and their steadfast commitment to implementation. They establish a benchmark that leaves Canada's provinces in the dust.

The six provincial reports all honed in on the need for greater integration. More specifically, they struggled with the question of how to forge stronger links between universities and colleges to improve credit recognition and system planning.

Only three provinces – B.C., Quebec, and Alberta – have credit transfer systems in place. Meanwhile, students in other provinces face costly and unfair barriers to progress. The New Brunswick commissioners cited a vivid example of an instructor who taught the same course in a university and a college, using the same curriculum and the same exam. However, the university did not recognize the college credit.

The Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfers creates a forum for exchanging best practices in credit transfer, but progress has been painfully slow – a far cry from the European effort.

The provincial reviews also identified a serious gap in the provinces' capacity to do system-wide planning. With 20 per cent or more of students dropping out in their first year and another 20 to 30 per cent leaving before graduation, there is reason to believe that needs are not being met. Unfortunately, provinces have no way to determine whether existing programs can meet the needs of students.

Five of the six reports therefore call for a Quality Council to take the system-wide view. Ontario has created the Higher Education Quality Council; B.C., Alberta and Newfoundland have councils which provide accreditation for degrees but not institutions; New Brunswick has not yet responded to the advice.

Quality assurance is only possible if the councils have adequate data and if they can make comparisons across the 10 provinces and internationally. The Canadian Council on Learning has itemized a number of fundamental data gaps. For example, Canada has no mechanism to track what happens to students (and the public investment in their education) once they leave a college or university.

Altogether, Canada spends \$36-billion on higher education. Ministers of Education often use the rhetoric of a world class system. But until provinces are armed with better data and the capacity for quality assurance, we are all in the dark about what works and what needs fixing.

In a world where knowledge is the essence of comparative advantage, our universities and colleges can't afford to wait for provinces to take the lead. Their best bet is to invent their own version of the Bologna Process in order to weave together a pan-Canadian system – a system that will be truly ready to take on the world.