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From Where I Sit - Bologna Tasters Enter US Menus

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"What do US higher education people think about the Bologna Process?" a university rector asked me at last month's Eurasian Higher Education Leaders' Forum in Astana, Kazakhstan. Resisting the urge to reply with flippancies like "most of them think it produces a rich sauce for pasta" and "it's a fine way to turn out middling quality sausage", I suggested that most of them probably didn't think about it much, if at all.

Why? An easy explanation is the traditional isolationism of the US. But there are also some domestic realities.

Most US higher education institutions are locally focused, serving local communities and labour markets. There are more than 1,100 community colleges serving 13 million students. Nationally they enrol more than 40 per cent of undergraduates. They have more full-time students, about 5.5 million, than the total population of the Republic of Ireland. Yet community colleges rarely look beyond their state borders because their mission is fundamentally domestic.

Community colleges offer many two-year programmes, and their interest in mobility is confined largely to the opportunities for students to transfer to four-year programmes in state and private universities. International mobility is little considered.

Similarly, many state universities focus on serving the needs of the state. Some have limits on "out-of-state enrolments". North Carolina has a limit of 18 per cent on foreign enrolments - and that includes students from South Carolina. Others put a premium on the tuition fees for out-of-state students.

Regardless of history and circumstance, why should US educators be interested in the Bologna Process? One reason is the scale and presence of the European Higher Education Area. Its 46 nations have 35 million students in tertiary education programmes that are broadly comparable. This makes it easier for students and graduates to move between institutions and labour markets, increasing the value of qualifications. It makes European institutions more competitive than they were as members of separate national systems. It makes them more attractive to local and international students because the credentials are recognised more widely. And all this can help universities attract talent.

But it isn't just about competitiveness. There are potential domestic benefits from local application of some elements of the Bologna Process. The “tuning” element makes the learning outcomes of higher education more explicit and transparent. This enhances comparability across programmes, which can help with arguments about accountability and help align standards of courses with those of particular fields and disciplines such as law. More importantly, it helps communicate to the wider community and to potential students the value of higher learning. To further increase participation in US higher education, institutions need a better way to communicate with the slices of the school-leaver population that have not traditionally gone to college. They need to be able to give potential students a clear idea of what higher education is worth and how it lines up with career and academic opportunities. This is the sort of information potential students need to justify an investment in higher education.

Despite the US' isolationism and the strong local focus of much of its higher education, there has been some interest in the Bologna Process, especially in faculty-led tuning projects. With leadership and resources from the Lumina Foundation, tuning projects have been conducted at the state level, including a current pilot in Texas, and at the discipline level in the case of history. Given the time it took to create and implement the Bologna Process, it is far too early to expect these modest efforts to reach across the nation, but it is a beginning.