One of the most influential educational trends of the two last decades involves initiatives to construct common spaces of tertiary education. These projects—such as the Bologna Process and its core objective, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)—focus mainly on tertiary education, the production of knowledge, and internationalization, in response to requirements imposed by the knowledge society and globalization. As the first of the kind, the Bologna Process has sparked many debates, particularly regarding the feasibility and relevance to reproduce this model in other parts of the world.

Initiatives to harmonize higher education systems in other regions of the world have emerged as a consequence of the Bologna Process, including within the East African Community (EAC) and through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. While many of these initiatives are still in planning stages, they have provoked much discussion. Many involved in such debates have concluded that the Bologna Process is not an appropriate single model for harmonization and regional integration based on the following observations:

- Harmonization of higher education systems means standardization;
- Implementation in the absence of a macro process of regional integration—such as the European Union—is difficult;
- Regions vary widely in terms of social, economic, political, and educational developments;
- Within education systems there are differences in terms of size, modes of financing, diploma structures, and architectures, as well as teaching and pedagogical approaches.

This article tests these assumptions. Would a single model of harmonization of higher education such as Bologna be relevant in other regions of the world, such as Latin America?

Harmonization = Standardization?
One might argue that harmonization implies standardization, both within the European Union and in these other regions, putting cultural diversity and national identities at risk. Even intraregional standardization would limit institutional differentiation, equity, and applicability.

However, it is worth mentioning that some researchers argue Bologna’s harmonization process is more a process of convergence than standardization, and that the process respects national characteristics and diversity as well as institutional differentiation.

Diversity and Convergence in the Bologna Process
Studies generally reaffirm that institutional diversity and differentiation have a pronounced impact on quality and relevance, granting a wider access to students coming from diverse social and educational contexts. Differentiation is also a means of specialization; it produces graduates with a profile that may...
satisfy particular social needs, a contributing factor in productivity and competitiveness.

Europeans have opened new research avenues about differentiation by exploring various types of institutional diversity: internal and external, systemic, horizontal, and vertical. Research so far has demonstrated that, from its beginning, Bologna was never conceived as a process of standardization. The Sorbonne Declaration stressed that “the harmonization of European [higher] education systems’ architecture” aims at “encouraging a common frame of reference in order to improve external recognition and facilitate student mobility and employability... where national identities and common interests can interact and strengthen each other for the sake of European students and citizens.”

The fundamental objective of the process of harmonization is formulated in terms of “convergence,” and is understood as a dynamic process, without losing sight of the tension caused by national characteristics and diversity. Several studies, as well as the Bologna Declaration, emphasize that convergence is compatible with higher education diversity, and that diversity is in no way in and of itself an obstacle for a process of regional integration. In other words, far from being a rigid model, the Bologna Process is a process of convergence, offering the required flexibility to allow adaptation to a great number of alternatives within a common framework.

The Feasibility of a “Bologna Process” for Latin America

The second argument used against an integration process in other areas of the world is based on the existing inter- and intraregional differences with the European Union. However, considering the principal regional differences between the European Union and Latin America, as well as the differences within Latin America itself, this objection cannot be generalized to all parts of the world.

Interregional Differences. The absence of a project of regional integration in Latin America persists in spite of its cultural, historical, and linguistic bonds. In “The Bologna Process from a Latin American Perspective,” José Joaquín Brunner stresses that a project of regional integration would be a necessary prerequisite for the creation of a higher education common space in Latin America.

Among the 49 participating members in the Bologna Process, only 27 are European Union member states. These countries present important differences in terms of development, and have a great educational, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Therefore, the absence of prior regional integration does not seem to be in itself enough to invalidate a Bologna-like process.

Another argument raised against the viability of a Bologna Process in Latin America is the difference in prevailing educational models. However, convergence is not the only aim pursued. Indeed, the Bologna Process has also given rise to an innovative teaching-learning process centered on student learning and aimed at developing skills better suited to twenty-first century requirements. This model contrasts with the traditional educational model still prevailing in the majority of Latin American institutions, where much focus is on lecturing and note-taking, with evaluations based on memorization.

Fortunately, in spite of education model differences, collaborative projects between European and Latin American institutions have already proven that a basis of comparison can be established. For example, the Tuning Latin America Project achieved an identification of generic and specific skills in twelve disciplines through collaboration among Latin American institutions. Another example is the 6x4 UEALC project. These results show that the educational model promoted by Bologna should be perceived as an opportunity to reform and internationalize the educational model prevailing in Latin America.

Intraregional Differences. According to Brunner and Salvador Malo, the differences among higher education institutions in Latin American countries—in particular the various sizes, access rates, modes of financing, and relationships with the federal government—would make a process of integration impossible. Additionally, the proliferation of higher education institutions and a drastic growth of the private sector complicate the picture. As a consequence, the national systems of the region, far from moving...
toward a “greater degree of homogenization,” are conversely subject to strong centrifugal trends and a high degree of diversification occurring in a context of great competition.

A Basis for Reform
From its origins, the Bologna Process was conceived to enable a broad degree of cultural diversity and institutional differentiation. The high degree of differentiation in Latin American higher education systems should not be, in principle, an obstacle to convergence. The assumption that diversity and differentiation is an obstacle to convergence should be based on deeper and specific empirical and conceptual studies, such as those conducted for Europe. However, Brunner is correct that in the case of Latin America, the large proportion of private higher education institutions makes the establishment of supranational policies and a regional integration process complex.

Nevertheless, Latin American higher education systems should be open to learn from European lessons while adapting them for their own contexts. The Bologna Process could serve as a basis for much-needed reforms to modernize systems in terms of curricular structures, pedagogical approaches, and internationalization. Stakeholders of Latin American higher education systems have the opportunity to learn from international initiatives and experiences and use them as a basis to build innovative and competitive educational processes. Such processes would help make education a lever of development in Latin America, as it should be.

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Endnotes


Is a Bologna Process Right for Latin America?


13. For more information on the Tuning Latin America Project, see http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningal/.

