

The Myth of Standardized Business Education

The considerable differences in global business education models have long been viewed as a barrier between schools.

Eventually, however, these differences may become higher education's greatest strength.

by Howard Thomas

illustration by James Yang

It's been four years since the European Ministers of Education drafted their joint 1999 Bologna Declaration, which sought to define the parameters of undergraduate and graduate degrees in European countries. The task may look simple on paper, but in fact, it was an enormous undertaking in the face of the hundreds of models for higher education in the European Union.

Undersigned by representatives from 29 countries, the document sets out to turn the heterogeneous systems of higher education in European countries into a "European Higher Education Area," where higher education degrees are comparable, mobile, and widely recognized. Its stated purpose, among others, is to "increase the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education."

The educational trends that the Declaration's signatories hope to address in Europe are coming to bear on business schools worldwide. Students no longer are staying in their home countries to live and work, but traveling the world. Even now, these students face obstacles to their employment and education. A degree earned in India might not be recognized in Italy, for example. A diploma earned in Italy might not impress employers in Germany, and credits earned in Germany might not transfer to the United States. And yet, in an era of increasing globalization, such a narrow-minded view of international credentials needs to change.

What happens in Europe, then, over the next decade—the time period the Bologna Declaration has chosen to achieve its goals—has important implications for international business education. But while we search for ways to make the world's educational systems compatible, we should not strive to make them identical. Standardizing such a complex assembly of educational models would be impossible; moreover, it would be regrettable to lose the diversity they offer. On the other hand, establishing a system of *equivalencies* among school systems—in which educators understand and acknowledge the foundations for and value in international models of education—would benefit all institutions of higher education.



Education in Context

When we look at what's now happening in Europe, we can see a pattern that is beginning to occur worldwide. As it emerges from the creation of the European Union and the introduction of its common currency, the euro, Europe is experiencing a unique time in history. The discussion of the convergence of educational models with EU countries is a natural next step.

It's important to recognize, however, that this is not a discussion for European educators alone. Business schools worldwide are beginning to realize that educational models are no longer static, isolated structures. They are interacting at an accelerated level, and it will be important, if not crucial, that we be able to reconcile those models so that students can more easily cross borders to study and work.

To do so, we must recognize that our differences are not as much ideological as they are cultural. For instance, the evolution and development of business and educational institutions in the United States and Europe have their origins in the unique cultural, economic, and political environment of these diverse regions. We need only look at their environments to gain a better understanding of their educational institutions.

When we look at the U.S., we often think of capitalism, the system at the basis of the country's formation. In general terms, the U.S. has followed a market-oriented approach, considering private enterprise as the main driver of positive change. This market-based perspective has encouraged the development of flexible administrative mechanisms that lead to a high degree of openness to, and acceptance of, continuous change. At the macroeconomic level, the U.S. is a relatively homogeneous and large market.

In contrast, European countries have adopted a society-oriented approach, in which governments and the public sector have a more prominent role in shaping social and economic development. As a consequence, their administrative mechanisms are more bureaucratic and tradition-based, marked by a certain degree of conservatism and resistance to change. To protect the social dimension of the markets, European societies have adopted processes of change that tend to be more driven by consensus and take a longer time to build momentum. Furthermore, the European market is much more fragmented, since it is characterized by a wide diversity of languages, cultures, and legal systems.

As a result, business schools in Europe and the U.S. most often reflect their cultural contexts. In response to their market-driven culture, U.S. business schools quickly started developing standardized educational products of mass appeal, such as the MBA degree. Since their origins in the late 19th century, U.S. business schools have been less dependent on public funding and have learned to rely upon significant private support. Such support, which usually takes the form of financial donations by individuals and corporations, has allowed many schools to build large endowments to fund their enterprises.

European business schools have become more diverse, less standardized, and less institutionalized; but they are also more dependent on state policies and funding. It has taken them a much longer period of time to become legitimate entities in the educational landscapes of their countries.

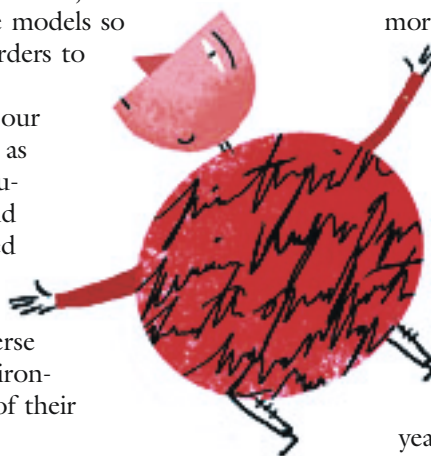
Thus, we have our diverse models in place. In the United States, a university-based undergraduate business degree usually comprises a four-year course of study, providing a general education in the first two years and business education in the final two years. In the German higher education system, students complete their *Diplomkaufmann*, which normally takes five years after secondary education. It also takes about five years to receive a degree from a French *grand école*.

In the United Kingdom, it may take only three years to receive a bachelor's degree in business. That degree, however, tends to be much more specialized than its U.S. counterpart. The U.K. traditionally focuses on general educational subjects during secondary education—or high school. Once students arrive at university, they follow a much more specialized course of study in their chosen fields in the sciences, arts, humanities, or business.

Education as a Function of Society

While it's important to recognize international differences in standards at the high school and university level, it is impossible to harmonize them. As mentioned above, the differences are based on *cultural* differences, more than educational differences. In other words, we can set up a system of rules and expectations; but different countries will interpret those rules in terms of their cultural norms.

The culture of the individual students and the way education fits their lives are products of the way the society operates. In encouraging and communicating a sensitive recognition of



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never have to leave their jobs; or via distance learning. We have over 2,000 MBA students but only 100 to 120 full-time MBA students annually.

It's important to note that, in general, European schools focused on executive education as a means of generating additional, flexible income much earlier than schools in the U.S. For example, the London Business School set up its Center for Management Development to develop tailored in-company courses as early as 1971. This is a practice that still remains important

today, particularly in Europe. The advertising pages in *The Economist* show that many European schools—including INSEAD, IMD, LBS, IESE, HEC, Warwick Business School, Cambridge, Oxford, and Bradford—regularly promote their executive education courses alongside those from key U.S. players, such as Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management, Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, MIT Sloan School of Business, the University of Michigan Business School, University of Chicago's Graduate School of Business, and Columbia University's Graduate School of Business.

In America, students are often willing to save their money to fund the MBA education and then dedicate themselves to pursuing that degree over the time it takes to earn it. A two-year degree would be unacceptable to most Europeans and the companies they work for—they are not willing to take two full years from their lives or fund their education and lifestyles while they earn the degree. The two degrees are products of different cultures.

Increasing Understanding

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of individual educational systems in Europe alone. It is this proliferation of diverse educational systems that the Bologna Declaration is meant to somehow reconcile. To develop a "European Higher Education area," the Declaration recommends a degree system that ironically follows a U.S. model, with an undergraduate cycle lasting a minimum of three years and a graduate cycle of study leading to a master's or doctoral degree. In addition, it has very specific statements, for example, about a requirement of four years' experience before an MBA degree—a general management degree—and also very clear statements about the nature and form of specialist master's degrees.

Is it necessarily desirable to model the European Union's higher education system so closely on that of the U.S.? Again, the differences are there for a reason that is deeply ingrained

different models of education, we also can see how education *should* differ from country to country. Educational systems often represent very high quality and a tremendous value within their regional contexts, even if they don't look like our own.

In the U.S., for example, the term "general education" for a business undergraduate degree typically means that up to 50 percent of the degree is in nonbusiness, liberal arts subjects. By contrast, in England and a number of European countries, general business education at the undergraduate level involves virtually no general education—the assumption is that students have had those courses in their high school careers.

In Great Britain, a one-year, full-time MBA degree is standard (with the notable exception of London Business School), while in the U.S., the two-year MBA degree is the norm. When looked at simplistically, in terms of the calendar alone, the degrees may seem as if they are not equivalent. However, in the U.S., each year in a typical MBA follows a semester system. Students study for two four-month semesters, break for the summer, and return for two more semesters of study. In Britain, students study in an intensive, 12-month program. Yes, these two models are different. But is one necessarily better than the other?

Flexible executive MBA programs in the U.S. have proliferated, but the flexible MBA program has remained mostly a product of countries outside the U.S. At Warwick Business School, we have four different MBA schedules based around a common curriculum: full-time for 12 months; part-time evening for 24 months; a three-year program, delivered as a series of modules that are one week to ten days in duration, so that students



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in the respective cultures. Expanded cultural understanding and recognition of the merit of our educational differences, then, may be a better way of reconciling educational systems within Europe, between Europe and the U.S., and, for that matter, among the countries of the world.

That said, not all educational systems, or all schools, are equivalent. Some schools are stronger in some areas than others. The Bologna Declaration's agenda for the future harmonization of learning structures in higher education across Europe strives to take the differences among schools into consideration, while still maintaining a set of standards that all can follow within their different cultural circumstances and frameworks.

Resolving such a paradox has been the daunting task for the European Union and the European Foundation for Management Development. This is also a challenge that accrediting bodies such as AACSB International have started to address, as they expand their reach internationally. And, as business schools begin to develop international partnerships, exchange programs, and alliances, it becomes all the more important that we continue the dialogue that the Bologna Declaration has begun.

Consideration, Not Standardization

When we look at issues of accreditation and quality assurance, the term "standardization" really may simply mean "understanding." To accredit business education in an environment such as Europe, where models differ so widely, we must implement more flexible guidelines and standards and take into consideration what is valuable within each model. Even more important, we must have the sensitivity to understand the different business cultures these countries represent. This mind-set is no less relevant to the world at large.

Things are changing for the better. In the U.S., for example, there has been a massive change in the international experience of students. Just a decade ago, students often took a European "tour," seeing 12 countries in 20 days. A bus took them from one hotel to another. They might as well have been in Dallas or St. Louis for all they learned of the culture. Today, however, students are spending a period of time—from a month to an entire term—in a single culture. They are trying to understand what it means to live there, from turning on a television, to using the metro system, to putting a plug in the electrical socket. This long-term model of "study abroad" is used by many European schools, including Warwick Business School, which offers extensive undergraduate and graduate study-abroad programs.

Even so, business education still faces challenges. For example, as diverse as the United States is, it seems incredible that many of its high schools and universities still do not require students to study a foreign language. And although internationalization is at the forefront of management education today, deans of many business schools beyond, say, the top 50 or 60 schools have very little idea of the nature of education in countries other than their own.

Often, educators worldwide have tried to reinvent international education as if it should follow a U.S. model. But that is absurd. Globalization is not Americanization. It has become a necessity for management education to hold more international conferences and provide avenues for people to exchange ideas. That is the short- to medium-term way of solving the problem.

As we look to long-term goals and solutions, we see it is essential for business school deans and faculty to recognize and become sensitive to the variety of cultural and educational models that exist beyond their home countries. In their search for partnerships and alliances, they will need to balance complementary points their institutions share with potential allies, while taking into consideration the value of those areas in which they differ. Through a clear understanding of such educational diversity, all models of business education should become both more internationally and culturally sensitive and much more enriched overall. **Z**

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