



Q&A: Bologna and Tuning

Why should the Bologna Process interest Americans?

Lumina Foundation for Education and a growing number of higher education leaders are interested in developments outside of the United States shaping higher education. At Lumina, this interest began when the Foundation established a goal of increasing attainment of high-quality undergraduate degrees and credentials in the United States from 39 percent to 60 percent by 2025. International data on degree attainment suggest the United States is “stuck” at levels that have remained constant for 40 years. Many other countries are increasing degree-attainment rates, in some cases to levels significantly above those in the United States. The Bologna Process is an international movement with significant implications. The process, named for the city in which it was launched in 1999, is an effort to promote transparency, coordination and quality assurance among the various higher education systems in Europe. The Bologna Process seeks to create a more seamless higher education system that:

- 1) Awards comparable degrees based upon defined, criterion-referenced learning outcomes,
- 2) Promotes college access and student mobility,
- 3) Implicitly embraces the need for increased degree attainment, and
- 4) Ensures educational quality.

Bologna is not a government mandate or treaty-based initiative. Bologna is not one program or project, but a set of independent-yet-interconnected initiatives that engage national higher education systems, universities and other stakeholders. The Bologna Process is enabling reform of higher education systems in 46 countries throughout Europe. Bologna’s influence stretches beyond Europe as other countries monitor the process and implement its developments.

What is Tuning and how is it related to Bologna?

An essential element of the Bologna methodology is known as “Tuning.” This process existed prior to Bologna but has become an important source of feedback. Tuning, supported by funding from the European Commission, is the process of “harmonizing” higher education programs and degrees by defining learning outcomes of the curricula by subject area. These outcomes are then linked to national and international Qualifications Frameworks that underlie much of the Bologna Process. Through 2008, at least 145 universities in 33 countries in Europe had engaged in Tuning projects, and 182 universities in 18 Latin American countries had followed suit.

In the Tuning process, each discipline (e.g., business, history, mathematics) establishes reference points and templates for writing statements of concrete learning outcomes – knowledge, the application of acquired knowledge, reasoning capacities, and skills – that qualify students to receive degrees in their chosen fields. While the phrasing of these outcome statements can vary among institutions, all must observe the agreed-upon reference points and templates. For each learning outcome, faculty in the discipline can then establish performance criteria, or definitions of what a student must demonstrate to attain that outcome. Each school or department in the discipline designs its own curricular program, delivery methods and assessments to help students attain the agreed-upon learning outcomes. The reference points and templates are arrived at in broad consultation through surveys and field testing with faculty members, students, employers, previous graduates, and faculty in other disciplines from the same institution. The product of the Tuning process in each discipline is a public statement of learning outcomes and criteria of attainment.

What are the benefits of Tuning?

With Tuning, students, employers, policymakers and the general public know what a degree in that field means, and why it represents learning in that particular field. A completed Tuning process also holds benefits for students who are not majors in a particular field but take courses in it. They, too, clearly see the learning objectives and performance criteria. The idea behind Tuning is not to create a monolithic system that limits institutions or forces them to adopt a particular approach. The degree programs at various colleges that participate in Tuning are not uniform. They aren't all playing the same song. Rather, they are "tuned" to perform in the same key. In this case, the Qualifications Frameworks represent these keys. The Tuning process creates a common language for describing subject-specific knowledge that's widely accessible. It builds a series of clearly visible reference points for all who work in the discipline. These reference points can be understood by faculty and administrators at the various colleges, as well as — and this is critically important — by students, employers and the general public.

In short, the Tuning process makes the value of any degree more clearly visible and more directly comparable by and among students, academics and employers. It also highlights — in real-world terms — the institution's contribution to the value of that degree. It serves as a starting point for shared definitions of quality and excellence. And it does this without limiting the flexibility and diversity of the individual institutions.

Have similar efforts been tried in the United States?

Tuning-like processes exist within U.S. higher education. Learning outcomes have been defined in many institutional curricula, as part of state and system-level academic program review processes, through accreditation (e.g., ABET), as part of licensure requirements and professional boards, and through the efforts of national higher education associations (e.g., American Association of Colleges & Universities). What has not occurred in the United States, however, is the development of a comprehensive approach to defining the learning outcomes representative of degrees in specific disciplines across different degree levels. Lumina and others want to determine whether Tuning offers a potential approach for the United States to better define higher education learning outcomes on a wide scale. To prepare, subject-area study groups were asked to gather benchmark statements, discipline-specific learning outcomes, reference points (for regulated professions), existing program descriptions, course catalogues, assessment techniques and external reference points, to the extent these exist.

How will the Tuning USA project work?

Lumina Foundation is sponsoring an exploratory project in the United States involving six subject areas offered by 25 colleges and universities in the states of Indiana, Minnesota and Utah. The project's aim is to study the design and implementation of Tuning in other countries and then test some of the features of the process, with the objective of determining whether the process can be engaged within states on a deeper, wider scale. The U.S. project will be conducted in 2009, with a launch in early April and completion by early December.

- 1) The states were invited to participate, with each state's higher education executive office coordinating that state's project.
- 2) State teams include a project director and representation from three or more institutions (e.g., research universities, regional four-year institutions, community colleges, independent institutions). At least one institution in each state is a flagship or major university. Each subject team includes an academic chairperson.
- 3) Lumina and its European and U.S. consultants will provide state project directors with training materials and opportunities to ask clarifying questions.
- 4) The state teams will function as "study groups" that explore the design, phases and outcomes of Tuning in Europe and elsewhere. While assessing the potential of the Tuning approach, the state teams may make reasonable modifications, in consultation with Lumina or its consultants, to make the process more worthwhile in their respective settings. The state teams also should consider the feasibility of developing full Qualifications Frameworks for their states.
- 5) Each state was asked to select at least two (but no more than three) academic disciplines or subject areas to examine at multiple degree levels (e.g., associate's, bachelor's, master's). Degrees in the chosen disciplines should be in high demand to pilot the Tuning methodology most effectively. At least two faculty members from each discipline in each institution will join the state team, with additional representation by state, system and institutional academic administrators. Student participation in each disciplinary group is critical; one student should serve on each subject-area team. Selecting subject areas that have been completed in Europe or elsewhere could serve as a foundation for initial work.
- 6) State teams will meet two to three times during the project. A plenary meeting will be held in early April in Chicago to kick off the project with all state teams and other national participants. The Tuning Process will begin at this 1½-day meeting, with Lumina's consultants serving as technical advisers. At least two Tuning sessions are expected in the states to wrap up work. Lumina consultants will attend at least one of the in-state meetings to observe and answer questions.
- 7) Ongoing interaction across the states will take place through a shared online workspace. Also, a meeting involving Lumina, its consultants and state team leaders will be held at the project's conclusion to debrief and discuss next steps.
- 8) The Tuning Process should include input via surveys from students, recent graduates and employers. The University of Groningen in the Netherlands will assist with these surveys and field tests. Depending upon interest among state participants, other stakeholders could

be involved, including K-12 teachers, representatives of accrediting bodies, trustees and policymakers.

- 9) State teams will explicitly map the employability of graduates in each Tuning subject area to positions in the labor market. State teams will provide Lumina with:
 - Final reports that describe the results of field testing and surveying to determine reference points;
 - A map of the employability of students who major in the subject areas;
 - A set of agreed-upon reference points for each subject area;
 - Draft degree profiles of academic programs grounded in explicit learning outcomes; and,
 - An overview and assessment of the process and recommendations for further work, if any.
- 10) Lumina Foundation will pay for the project, will be involved in planning, and will participate in the project as an observer. In addition, representatives of foundations, higher education and policy organizations may be invited to observe the project.
- 11) Robert Wagenaar, co-coordinator of the original Tuning Project, will guide the overall project. The work of states will follow the Tuning process as practiced in Europe and Latin America. Tim Birtwistle, a Bologna Expert from Leeds Metropolitan University in England, will serve as consultant, along with others from Europe. Cliff Adelman of the Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington, D.C., also will be available as a consultant to directly assist state teams.
- 13) The budget for the project will be \$150,000 per state.