Conclusions:
Canadian Perspectives on the Bologna Process
Conference held March 19–20, 2009

Participants at the conference on “Canadian Perspectives on the Bologna Process”, held at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, March 19 – 20, 2009, made the following findings and proposals:

A. Assessment of the Bologna Process from a Canadian perspective

1. The Bologna Process is a highly significant development that is already substantially affecting post-secondary education around the world and will, in all likelihood, unfold with even broader impact in the years to come. The opportunity to receive more in-depth information and to reflect on this Process with a wide range of colleagues from all across Canada and from other countries is appreciated. There is a strong need for further information and exchange within Canada on a local, provincial, and national level.

2. The Bologna Process is an expression of the increasing need for a global understanding of higher education. At the same time, it is effectively promoting and accelerating globalization in higher education. Canadian post-secondary education must pay more attention to the global environment in which it is operating. Local, provincial, and national decision-making in post-secondary education should be taken with a more acute awareness of trends and developments around the world. The Bologna Process challenges universities in Canada, as in all other parts of the world, to rethink their role in the global environment of post-secondary education.

3. The Bologna Process has very effectively created a "story" that has increased the worldwide visibility, innovation, and reputation of European higher education. Europe has thus improved its international market position. Canadian universities and colleges must enhance their competitive efforts in order to project the special advantages of Canada as a destination for study and research for students and young researchers around the world.

4. Trends and developments in the Bologna Process that would jeopardize institutional autonomy and, in effect, lead to harmonization (even if the official rhetoric denies such intentions), are of concern.
5. The Bologna Process addresses a range of key issues that higher education institutions from all over the world can identify with as relevant and meaningful for their own national and institutional purposes. European universities and colleges have thus created an agenda for a global debate on post-secondary education. Canadian post-secondary institutions can and should actively contribute experiences and ideas, highlight their own strengths and achievements, and add their own topics to that agenda. The global debate on the future of post-secondary education will be enriched by Canadian values and perspectives.

6. The Bologna Process has initiated a rethinking of the significance and meaning of Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD degrees that can also stimulate significant discussions for the future development of post-secondary education in Canada. The Bologna Process, in the context of the many-layered discussions on curriculum reform, is strongly focusing on students’ needs. Canada could take inspiration from these discussions, with a view to maintaining attractiveness of Canadian universities and colleges for domestic and international students.

7. The notion proposed in the Bologna Process that the effectiveness of the learning process should be evaluated in terms of learning outcomes is welcome. Whilst realizing the very substantial difficulties that such a re-orientation would entail, great benefits arise from focusing on learning outcomes rather than input factors. The Bologna Process seems far from having found all the answers that allow a successful re-orientation towards learning outcomes; but full credit is given to the Bologna Process for forcefully promoting this notion.

8. The concept of “employability” is one of the key elements for redefining curricula in Bologna Europe. The value and relevance of that concept for Canadian post-secondary institutions is of concern. In Canada, the prevailing tradition of a liberal arts oriented curriculum for undergraduate education has been evolving over many decades and should be protected and carried forward into the future. Ultimately, however, the student’s best interest and the student’s long term benefit should of paramount importance for any decisions on curriculum design.

9. There is a need to create more flexibility in graduate admissions in Canada. For a variety of reasons, the Bologna-type three year undergraduate degrees are not considered a blueprint from which Canadian post-secondary education would want to take inspiration. However, there should be flexibility and openness in the way that graduate admissions are handled in Canada. Sheer weighing of length of courses/programs does not seem appropriate.

10. The Bologna Process is setting standards for improved understanding across borders in terms of the meaning of degrees. In addition, it is building pathways for easier transferability of credits. Canada should actively seek opportunities for linking with these developments and existing infrastructure and information should be better advertised. Though less of an urgent need in a Canadian environment where students (unlike in Europe) are provided with transcripts, the concept of the “Diploma Supplement” should be explored to potentially offer better transparency and improved information to employers and other post-secondary institutions in Canada and beyond.
11. The Bologna Process has heightened awareness of international connectedness and the value of exchanges and collaboration across national borders, within Europe and beyond. Canada is not yet making best use of existing opportunities due to a lack of information and scarce funding, especially seed funding to initiate or expand international programs.

12. The Bologna Process enhances the standing of lifelong learning and helps to develop new approaches to lifelong learning. Canada should make best possible use of learning from European partners and collaborating with them more strategically.

13. Joint and double degrees that have been called the “hallmark of the Bologna Process” are yet to be tested in a broader way in Canada. There are a number of problematic aspects to these degrees, but other parts of the world are embracing these models quite enthusiastically. More information and more opportunities to study existing practices are needed.

B. Recommendations for future activities

1. Generate more opportunities for information on worldwide developments in post-secondary education in general and, in particular, the Bologna Process. Involve a broad range of stakeholders, including students and employers, in collaborative discussions and exchange of information/experience on implications of the Bologna Process. Develop nationwide forums/networks for exchange of information. Support joint efforts to develop innovative answers and creative approaches that respond to global challenges. Create a Bologna listserv or newsletter. Disseminate effective examples and successful models. Build internal capacities in individual universities and colleges; identify champions.

2. Produce tool sets and materials (power point presentations, checklists, manuals, case studies) that assist individual institutions of post-secondary education with their information efforts.

3. Given that discussion/interaction with partners in Bologna countries is needed (rather than just talking about Bologna countries), provide seed money for travel that allows for initial contacts and exploration of potential for cooperation and exchange.

4. Universities in Canada should liaise more and try to build some commonality for standards and criteria for graduate admissions. Effective international marketing of graduate studies in Canada will be hampered if the admissions picture is overly unclear and heterogeneous.

5. Use Bologna to rethink Canadian degrees and analyze the significance and meaning of Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD degrees. Particular attention needs to be given to better understand the role of Master’s degrees.

6. Provide better, up-to-date information on programs and qualifications from around the world. Create improved access to such information. Raise awareness on the Lisbon Convention and its implications for Canada. Credit transfer requires trust. Build more immediate interaction with European partners that can enhance mutual knowledge and foster trust. Systematically activate international faculty on Canadian campuses to help build bridges.

8. Explore more closely the relevance of a “tuning” model for Canada.

9. Create opportunities to analyze potential of joint and double degrees. Assist with providing more clarity on terminology and standards.

10. Test the idea of the “Diploma Supplement” for adaptation in Canada and investigate existing innovative practices in Canada.

11. Individual institutions and their provincial governments should provide transparent information on their courses and programs to market themselves more effectively internationally and allow for improved collaboration with international partners.

12. Engage federal and provincial governments and other stakeholders to support such activities. Raise political awareness of the need to respond to global competition for best talent. Build consensus on ongoing commitment to national branding and on a sustainable national approach to marketing Canadian post-secondary education around the globe.