

The New Three-Year Bachelor's Degree in the U.S.: Redefining Graduate Admissions and International Credential Recognition

Executive Summary

Jasmin Saidi-Kuehnert

A growing number of regionally accredited U.S. universities are piloting three-year bachelor's degrees requiring roughly 90 semester credits, an alternative to the traditional 120-credit model. Designed to reduce costs and accelerate pathways for adult learners, career-changers, and high-achieving students, these programs raise important questions about quality, recognition, and long-term value. While they promise affordability and faster entry into the workforce or graduate study, their acceptance by employers, graduate schools, and licensing bodies remains uncertain.

This paper examines the emergence of three-year bachelor's degrees, situates them in global and domestic contexts, and considers the implications for students, institutions, and the U.S. higher education system.

Introduction

To reduce college costs and shorten time-to-degree, a growing number of U.S. universities are offering three-year bachelor's degrees requiring approximately 90 semester credits, a significant departure from the long-standing 120-credit, four-year model. These programs, introduced at regionally accredited institutions, are designed to serve adult learners, career-changers, and high-achieving students eager to enter the workforce or graduate study sooner.

U.S. Universities Offering Three-Year Bachelor's Degrees

As of the publication of this position paper, we have learned that at least 70 institutions are either already offering three-year bachelor's degree programs or are actively considering them. Several states are strong proponents of the three-year model and are encouraging institutions to expand such offerings. For example, in 2024, Indiana passed legislation requiring its public universities to develop at least one three-year bachelor's degree program by July 2025. Kansas has also established a task force to explore the possibility of reduced-credit bachelor's degree pathways. Below is a list of the institutions that spearheaded the movement by launching their three-year, 90-credit bachelor's degree programs:

1. Brigham Young University–Idaho & Ensign College (via BYU–Pathway Worldwide)

Accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), these institutions offer fully online, three-year bachelor's degrees in fields such as Applied Business Management, Information Technology, Communication, Family & Human Services, and Software Development. Programs generally require 90–94 credits and have gained popularity among non-traditional and international students.

2. Hawai'i Pacific University (HPU)

Accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC), HPU has announced a three-year, 90-credit Bachelor of Science in Global Business, which is structured to allow students to complete their studies and enter the workforce one year earlier than in the traditional four-year model. The program is scheduled to

launch in fall 2026 and is designed to be completed across twelve eight-week terms.

3. Johnson & Wales University (JWU)

Accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), JWU has launched both campus-based and online three-year degrees. Beginning in Fall 2025, students can pursue 90–96 credit bachelor’s degree programs in Computer Science, Criminal Justice, Graphic Design, and Hospitality Management. JWU Online also offers accelerated three-year options in Computer Science and Hospitality.

4. Northwood University

Accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), Northwood offers a 90-credit Bachelor of Applied Science in Cybersecurity as part of the College in 3 Exchange. Students may choose the three-year track for faster workforce entry or the traditional 120-credit pathway if preparing for graduate study.

5. University of Maine System

Accredited by NECHE, the University of Maine System became the first public university system in the state to approve three-year bachelor’s degrees as of July 14, 2025. Pending NECHE approval, the pilot will include accelerated online programs in Public Administration, Business Management, and Psychology at the Augusta, Fort Kent, Machias, and Presque Isle campuses. These programs are targeted toward adult learners.

Accreditation and Recognition Considerations

All of the institutions listed above hold regional accreditation through recognized accrediting bodies (NECHE, NWCCU, HLC, WSCUC). As such, their three-year degrees are generally accepted for employment purposes. However, graduate admission for holders of the three-year, 90-credit bachelor’s degree is contingent on individual program requirements, which may review course content, elective breadth, or minimum credit loads.

For example:

- Northwood University advises students planning graduate study to complete the full 120 credits to ensure prerequisite coverage.
- University of Maine System students are encouraged to verify that their accelerated programs include coursework necessary for advanced study.
- Professional licensure in certain states may still require a four-year, 120-credit bachelor’s degree.

Global Context and Lessons Learned

The rise of the U.S. three-year, 90-credit bachelor’s degree signals a potentially transformative shift in undergraduate education. This transformation raises pressing questions: Will these shorter programs hold equal weight in graduate admissions? How will they be received by employers and licensing bodies? What lessons can be drawn from international precedents?

This is not the first time the higher education community has confronted the implications of shorter bachelor’s cycles. When three-year degrees became the standard under the Bologna Process in Europe,

U.S. institutions initially expressed hesitation, questioning whether Bologna graduates had sufficient academic depth. Over time, perspectives evolved, supported by research and dialogue such as the AACRAO Bologna Symposia (2006 and 2017), which worked to clarify recognition practices and ensure fair treatment of Bologna-compliant graduates in U.S. admissions.

Framing the Debate

The adoption of three-year bachelor's degrees by U.S. universities complicates long-standing assumptions about graduate admissions. If U.S. institutions begin awarding these credentials, will this prompt a reconsideration of policies that have historically excluded international three-year degree holders? Some U.S. universities are already re-examining their stance, acknowledging the global prevalence of three-year qualifications and their academic rigor.

This paper explores the issue through four lenses:

1. **The European Experience Under Bologna** – lessons learned from the implementation of the three-year model.
2. **Evolution of U.S. Admissions Practices** – how perspectives toward international three-year degrees have shifted.
3. **Institutional Case Study** – the perspective of a U.S. university considering recognition of three-year degrees for graduate admission.
4. **Broader Implications for Graduate Schools** – policies for consistency, equity, and academic integrity moving forward.

By situating the debate within both a historical and contemporary framework, this paper assesses the value, challenges, and opportunities of the U.S. three-year bachelor's degree model for students and institutions alike.

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The European Experience Under Bologna

Lessons Learned from the Implementation of the Three-Year Bachelor's Degree Model

Emily Tse

In 1999, twenty-nine countries across Europe signed the Bologna Declaration, agreeing to reform and harmonize their higher education systems into a three-cycle structure, namely the bachelor, master, and doctorate degrees. Today, there are forty-nine signatories, and the transformation has been no small feat. It is helpful to reflect on the evolution of its recognition in the U.S., particularly among university admissions offices and credentials evaluation agencies.

Prior to the Bologna Process, first-level university degrees in Europe were frequently five years in length. Because university education was heavily subsidized by the government in many European countries, tuition in those places was minimal or non-existent. So, it was not uncommon for students to take longer to complete their degrees, which also often led to perceptions that their durations were longer by definition. Against this backdrop, the introduction of a clearly defined three-year bachelor's degree in most of the Bologna signatory countries was novel and seismic. Note: while it may be four years in some countries, three years remains the standard.

When the Bologna Process began, there was unevenness in its adoption and confusion among the public due to the sheer scope in effort, particularly with employers in how to regard these degrees. Adoption and implementation were not occurring at the same rate or in the same way. ECTS credits and grades were inconsistently used, and incorrect usage could also be found in the beginning. As an example, a three-year bachelor's degree should have at minimum 180 ECTS credits; however, this was not always reflected in the transcripts issued for bachelor's degrees that were awarded there.

With the passage of time, however, Bologna-compliant degrees became more understood and accepted by all, both by the educational institutions who received the mandate to adopt the new system and by the public at large. Currently, ECTS credits and grades are consistently used, and the Bologna-compliant Diploma Supplement is consistently available. Moreover, these tools have been influential in facilitating recognition, particularly in having standardized information about the credential clearly indicated on an official record of study, otherwise known as the Diploma Supplement. Details include the minimum entrance requirement(s) to the program and what the resulting qualification gives access to, in terms of academic and professional rights and privileges. In fact, students from all educational institutions and all countries can benefit from such an aid, not just those relevant to the Bologna Process.

Despite the existence of three-year bachelor's degrees in other parts of the world, the introduction of the three-year version of the first-cycle Bologna-compliant degree caused much disruption among U.S. admissions officers and credentials evaluators, forcing them to reassess their recognition practices. Through the years, many professional associations tackled these issues through symposia, conference presentations, roundtables, and articles in their newsletters. They include the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO); NAFSA: Association of International Educators (NAFSA); NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management (NAGAP); The Association of International Credential Evaluation Professionals (TAICEP); and the Association of International Credential Evaluators (AICE). Several takeaways can be teased out regarding the principles that underpin the approach taken by many admissions offices vs. evaluation agencies and the evolution and variation of admissions policies.

Many grappling with this issue first queried what guidance can be taken from the requirements of the U.S. accrediting bodies. However, it became clear that no accreditation standards prescribe specific admissions practices. Rather, the focus is on clear and fair practices, a stance particularly articulated by such bodies as the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

With this hurdle cleared, international education professionals took stock in their approach to credentials evaluation, which can be described in two main camps: benchmarking and year-counting. Benchmarking is more outcomes-based, focusing on a comparative analysis of the learning outcomes and what the credential gives access to. Year-counting, on the other hand, gives more emphasis and weight to the duration of the program of study.

However, these categorizations are oversimplified. In truth, credentials evaluation in the U.S is more nuanced and is arguably a hybrid of the two. Most international education professionals in Europe follow the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which calls for the recognition of a credential unless substantial differences have been identified. Evaluators in Europe look at similar features as U.S.-based evaluators, such as the entry requirements, content of a program, and academic and professional rights and privileges. They also look at the overall workload.

In the U.S., the added specific focus on the years of study stems from the frequent need to convert the education completed abroad into U.S. credits, which is based on seat time. In Europe, a general comparability statement is more common versus a course-by-course evaluation report that is found in the U.S., which includes converted credits, grades and grade point average (GPA). Credits are the academic currency in the U.S., facilitating many aspects of education and professional licensure, such as:

- Tracking a student's progress toward degree completion
- Facilitating transfer credit
- Charging tuition and fees
- Determining an instructor's workload
- Distributing financial aid
- Budgeting and planning resources
- Monitoring accreditation and licensure

By way of example, in order to be a certified public accountant (CPA) in the state of California, a candidate must prove completion of:

- A minimum total of 150 semester credits, which would include at least
- 24 credits in accounting
- 24 credits in business
- 20 credits in related studies, and
- 10 credits in ethics.

However, the number of credits embedded in licensure criteria is not restricted to accounting alone. This can be found across many professions.

One must recognize that credits are a quantitative measure of one's studies and not a qualitative one. Nonetheless, when a U.S. bachelor's degree equivalency is given, one must normally be able to show a

minimum of 120 semester credits, which is based on four years of study. For this reason, through the years of debates that have followed, most credentials evaluation agencies will maintain the need for completion of a four-year program of study for consideration for a U.S. bachelor's degree equivalency. If the three-year degree is predicated on studies for which university credit is given, such as Advanced Level examinations (A Levels), it would lead to a cumulative total of four years of study and 120 credits. In such instances, a U.S. bachelor equivalency is also granted.

For university admissions, however, a different story unfolds. In the beginning, the stance was more conservative in the acceptance of three-year degree holders for admission. However, with the passage of time, institutions became more comfortable and flexible in their approach. Admittedly, however, the change in reception was also partly economics-driven, with the need to create or widen the eligibility pool of international students. The reality is that, unlike evaluation agencies, universities have more leeway and do not need to establish a U.S. degree equivalency that would serve all sectors, including immigration, education, and employment/professional licensure. Rather, university admissions offices only need to determine the student's level of preparedness for graduate study. This view was presented and argued at AACRAO's 2006 Symposium on the Bologna Declaration.

When speaking with and listening to graduate schools, whether at conferences or through informal interviews over the years, it is clear that the range of admissions policies has been vast across institutions and across programs within the same institution. The variations even within an institution signal the decentralized nature of most graduate admissions offices, as each graduate program will have its own entry requirements. At the start, there were more conditional admissions, case-by-case decisions, or requirements for a bridge program to be completed. However, their numbers declined over time with admissions decisions more in favor of three-year holders or a subset thereof. For example, realizations set in that bridge programs were not meaningful, as the coursework never represented content of a fourth or final year of study in a bachelor's degree. Rather, the bridge program was often "random" general education coursework. These days, bridge programs are rarely found as a requirement for three-year bachelor's degree holders.

Admissions policies are often shaped by what is seen and received in the office. As an example, some universities may have clearly delineated policies with the favorable acceptance of three-year degree holders from India but the contrary regarding those from Europe and the Bologna Process, simply due to the sheer gap in volume of applications between the two regions. For the acceptance of three-year degrees from India, there is also often the accompanying caveat that the applicants graduate from a university with a particular degree classification and National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) rating. Conversely, there are institutions that may only have established favorable admissions policies for students from the Bologna signatory countries due to the quality assurance mechanisms built in from the reforms to the exclusion of other countries with three-year degrees. It has become clear that while consistency is needed in policymaking, differences can be found among three-year bachelor's qualifications by country in turn leading to different admissions policies. As it has often been argued, not all three-year degrees are created equally.

Variations in Graduate Admissions Policies regarding 3-Year Degree Holders

Based on source country	Based on admitting graduate program	Based on year-counting	Other
All 3-year degrees (with or without caveats)	Same major only	1+3	Conditional, provisional admission

such as GRE/GMAT score reqs)		(e.g., three-year program following a 13-year elementary & secondary ed system)	
Bologna countries only (based on QA standards)	For MBA programs only	3+1 (e.g., three-year program plus an additional year of academic post-baccalaureate study)	Case-by-case
India only (dependent on NAAC rating and degree classification)	For the executive MBA, but not regular MBA programs	Bridge program	

Universities that accept three-year degree holders have all noted that these students have been successful in their respective graduation programs. Additionally, there are no perceived differences in the performances of students who have three vs four-year degrees, especially as the former group tends to have three years of study devoted to the major versus the latter group who has a lot of their coursework devoted to general education and electives. Nonetheless, representatives from the University of Phoenix and Woodbury University have also shared that English language proficiency indicators require attention and that having an infrastructure to support English writing is key.

The recent introduction of three-year bachelor's degrees in the U.S. and their reception will be of equal interest. At present, these U.S. degrees are in applied areas, focusing on workforce readiness rather than preparation for graduate school. However, it is anticipated that in time, these degrees in the U.S. may evolve and expand. Initial reactions were shared at an annual TAICEP conference, with one representative from an ENIC-NARIC office viewing these degrees as potentially more vocational in nature. That said, it is also anticipated that these U.S. new three-year bachelor's degrees, along with their recognition, will develop over time, both in the U.S. and abroad.

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An Institutional Perspective

The Perspective of a U.S. University Considering Recognition of Three-Year Bachelor's Degrees for Graduate Admission

LesLee Clauson Eicher

About the Institution

Seattle University (Seattle U), a Jesuit, Catholic university founded in 1891, is a private, national, urban university located in Seattle, Washington. The student population is about 8,300 students including undergraduate, graduate, law, and students at the newest campus, Cornish College of the Arts at Seattle University (South Lake Union campus).

Our Situation

Seattle U has been authorized to admit foreign students on F-1 visas for many years, but until relatively recently, international students made up only a small percentage of graduate students in many of the graduate programs (with notable exceptions in business and technology). Transcript evaluations were done in-house by the Undergraduate Admissions office when needed, which was not often.

Seattle U based its admissions decisions on the recommendations of the (former) National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials and of AACRAO EDGE (Electronic Database for Global Education). These resources tended to be conservative rather than generous in their placement recommendations and tended to rely on year-counting as a methodology; see the previous section for an overview of benchmarking versus year-counting. The year-counting methodology meant that non-U.S. three-year undergraduate degrees following a twelve-year elementary/secondary sequence were deemed inadmissible, since $12+3=15$ clearly fell short of the $12+4$ US model.

Over time, Seattle U realized that using the conservative year-counting methodology could decrease enrollment numbers. We didn't want to lose potentially good students, and so, in collaboration with the Registrar's Office, a pathway was created to allow otherwise ineligible three-year degree holders to be considered for admission.

Three-Year Degree Policy

The Three-Year Degree Policy (3YDP), as it was titled, was drafted in 2004 and last revised in 2014. It is based on year-counting. To illustrate: a student with a twelve-year elementary/secondary sequence + a four-year undergraduate degree ($12+4$) is admissible, as is a student with a $13+3$ sequence. In contrast, a student with $11+3$ or $11+4$ is inadmissible.

It is in the middle of these two areas that the 3YDP can take effect. Students with $12+3$ or $11+4$ may take a standardized examination such as GRE, GMAT, or MAT can then be deemed eligible for consideration of admission to graduate standing.

This system worked for Seattle U for some time, but gradually we noticed that students who were required per the 3YDP to take the GRE most often simply disappeared. We assume that they enrolled at another U.S. university with more relaxed admissions requirements.

At this point, the possibility of admitting holders of non-U.S. 3-year bachelor's degrees to graduate standing crept into the conversation. With it came many questions. We asked ourselves the following:

- Are the three-year degrees comparable in content and outcomes to four-year degrees?
- Would we be compromising our high academic standards to accept the shorter degrees as comparable to U.S. bachelor's degrees?
- Would it be unfair to domestic students?
- Would we be delivering unqualified students to our faculty?
- Would we be setting international students up to fail?
- If we didn't accept three-year degrees, would we lose students to other institutions, thus losing tuition dollars?
- If we didn't accept three-year degrees, were we being stubbornly slow to modernize and adapt to changing standards and best practices?

The Current Situation

Seattle U's business school made the decision within the past two years to accept some three-year (12+3) degrees to some programs. Graduate Admissions, together with the business school, drafted and applied a new policy: holders of three-year (12+3) bachelor's degrees can be considered for admission to one of Seattle U's two graduate accounting programs if they also hold an accounting credential from a professional accounting body such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India.

Additionally, Seattle U accepts three-year Bologna-compliant bachelor's degrees across the board, although some Bologna-compliant bachelor's degrees represent 12+3, while others represent 13+3.

What Next?

Once U.S. institutions begin awarding three-year, 90-credit fully accredited degrees that could even admit to graduate standing, we will have to take a closer look at our international admissions policies. If we accept U.S. three-year bachelor's degree holders to our graduate programs, will we also accept non-U.S. three-year bachelor's degree holders?

Our new Dean for Graduate Studies is a proponent of admitting three-year (12+3) degree holders to graduate standing. Some reasons for admitting these candidates include:

- Fairness: why do so many U.S. institutions admit Bologna three-year bachelor's degrees without question, while three-year bachelor's degrees from other parts of the world have additional requirements?
- Preparedness: faculty report that some three-year degree holders from India and Africa are better prepared than their American counterparts.
- Applicant numbers: India is the top sending country to U.S. institutions.
- Institutional values: refusing three-year bachelor's degrees outright is an unwelcoming and non-inclusive policy; some may even see it as racism.
- Best practices: many more U.S. institutions admit three-year (12+3) bachelor's degree holders to graduate standing than did so in the past.

Note from the author: While we cannot say for sure where this process will lead us, at Seattle U the discussion will continue. With the support of our like-minded Dean, I have proposed a policy update for Seattle U's Graduate Admissions. The Dean will bring it forward to the Academic Assembly, who will make the final decision.

Proposed Policy Update: Admission of Three-Year Degree Holders

- Policy Statement: Applicants holding “true” three-year undergraduate degrees will be considered eligible for admission to graduate standing. We will not state that the three-year (12+3) is comparable to a U.S. bachelor’s degree. This distinction aligns with institutional accreditation standards and avoids reliance on year-counting.
- Admission Criteria: Eligibility will be based on academic preparation relevant to the graduate program. Faculty approval is required for admission to appropriate programs. Examples include:

Example Countries	Degree	With faculty approval, admit to appropriate degree programs
India	Bachelor of Arts (3 years)	Humanities and social sciences
	Bachelor of Science (3 years)	Social sciences, life and natural sciences
	Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Business Administration (3 years)	Business and social sciences
	Bachelor of Computer Applications (3 years)	Science and technology
Pakistan	Bachelor of Arts (3 years)	Humanities and social sciences
	Bachelor of Science (3 years)	Social sciences, life and natural sciences
	Bachelor of Commerce (3 years)	Business and social sciences
Sri Lanka	Bachelor’s (General) (3 years)	Appropriate degree programs

Outstanding Questions:

1. Applicant Quality:
Will this policy change lead to an increase in underqualified applicants? How can we ensure clarity in admissions criteria to help applicants self-assess their eligibility?
2. Student Success Monitoring:
What systems can we implement to track student success and attrition among admitted three-year degree holders?
3. Impact Measurement:
How will we measure the effectiveness of this policy change in terms of:
 - a) Enrollment yield
 - b) Time to decision
 - c) Overall benefit to students and the institution

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Evolution of U.S. Admissions Practices and Broader Implications for Graduate Schools

How perspectives toward international three-year degrees have shifted and policies for consistency, equity, and academic integrity moving forward

Robert Watkins and William Paver, Ph.D.

We have now seen the evolution U.S. graduate admissions practices toward three-year bachelor's degrees and the challenges facing one U.S. institution as it considers accepting three-year bachelor's degrees for graduate admission. Moving forward, we next need to examine the broader implications for graduate schools in the U.S. There are thousands of graduate schools at institutions in the U.S. Of course, opinions, institutional needs, and overall institutional variety and mission will result in multiple approaches to the issue of admission to graduate study in the light of the now transformed undergraduate degree landscape. Even so some factors should be considered as U.S. Graduate Schools debate admissions policy.

The first factor to examine is the overarching concept for the two types of degrees. The traditional principle behind the U.S. four-year 120-credit (or more) degree has been mobility. The degree needed to contain enough varied coursework beyond the major and the minor to permit admission to graduate study even to a program not precisely identical to that of the undergraduate degree. While this is not always true (i.e., for engineering, fine arts, most science majors), there is some room for latitude (i.e., for business for non-Bachelor of Business Administration degrees, Law School, mobility into various programs in the arts, etc.). This is possible due to the broad extent to which the traditional bachelor contains general education. If this element is what is sacrificed in a three-year 90 credit degree, such flexibility is curtailed.

Also, the concept behind the shorter degrees may be such that graduate study is not the intended pathway for these graduates. Thus far (and it is certainly early days), the impulse behind these new degrees is not only to finish a degree more quickly and cheaply but to get the graduates into the work force in a more timely and less expensive fashion. Assuming this remains the case, the decision for graduate schools may not be so very difficult after all. The 90-credit bachelor's degree is not designed to easily move on to graduate study compared to the longer, more broadly constructed 120-credit bachelor's degree. What may transpire for U.S. graduate schools is a situation akin to that found in Ontario, Canada, where the 90-credit three-year bachelor ordinary degree is not accepted into graduate study and only the four-year honours bachelor's degree is admitted.

At this juncture, the three-year bachelor's degree is certainly not widespread in higher education institutions in the U.S. One of the salient features of the three-year bachelor's degree is the fact that they have been approved by some of the U.S. regional accrediting organizations. A reasonable question to ask at this point is why the regional associations have taken this step currently; further research into this question is warranted and necessary to understand the intent of the associations regarding this matter. For example, is the primary reason for this step to reduce the economic burdens imposed by the four-year bachelor's degree credential as the costs of higher education escalate?

The impact of the potential of three-year bachelor's degrees to alter how students are admitted to graduate schools should be studied, and the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) should be consulted as part of that process. The opinions of their membership group will have a direct effect on the work of the AACRAO and its International Education Standards Council (IESC), and AACRAO should consider convening a group to discuss the issue of three-year bachelor's degrees. This meeting could also include

representatives from the regional accrediting associations, particularly the ones that have formally approved the creation of three-year bachelor's degrees. Other groups that may have an interest include the Educational Testing Service (ETS), NAGAP, Institute of International Education (IIE), and TAICEP.