

Reforming the Curricula in the Universities of South East Europe in View of the Bologna Process

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Although the Bologna Process expresses the conviction that the higher education systems of the countries signatory of the Bologna Declaration (1999) should become increasingly comparable and compatible, it leaves higher education as a national responsibility and protects and encourages cultural and educational diversity. Given this statement of principle, the author discusses the special problems involved in adapting the higher education systems of South East Europe to the Bologna Process, citing his own country, Slovenia, as an example. He examines the issues of diversity versus integration, the modernization of curricula, the development of a proper balance between institutional autonomy and the national co-ordination of higher education, the links between university and non-university higher education, and the preparation, in higher education institutions, of teachers for primary and secondary school education.

The Bologna Process has become well-known throughout the European academic communities and even beyond. There is a growing interest in its evolution and in the message that it bears. It has become a matter of specific interest in particular regions, for instance, in South East Europe in which four countries have recently applied to join the Process at the September Berlin Conference. Nevertheless, the first question to be asked should be a basic one: What do we expect from “Bologna”, and what does “Bologna” demand of us?

Let us begin with a negative reply: Undoubtedly, we do not expect to renounce national responsibilities in higher education and institutional autonomy. But, in fact, “Bologna” does not demand such renunciation of us.

A PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUE: DIVERSITY AND INTEGRATION

The Bologna Process expresses the conviction of many European countries and many academic institutions that, in an age of globalization, they should agree to make their higher education systems increasingly comparable and compatible, to take mutual advantage of their cultural diversity and different traditions in research and teaching, to continuously improve the quality of their education, to ease student mobility, and to assist young people in obtaining mutually recognized qualifications. The values underlying the Bologna Process are parallel to those that underlie the much broader processes of the integration of the European continent.

Today, European nations are very much aware of the reality that “melting pot” methods are not appropriate for achieving their goals. On the contrary, in specific European traditions and circumstances, “melting pot” methods have sometimes produced terrible results. The negative potential is particularly true when culture, education, and research are at stake. Europe was divided and subjected to mutual hostilities, throughout many centuries, and many of the resulting confrontations inspired cultural, religious, and linguistic differences. Today, the European countries recognize particular identities but they also recognize cultural diversity as their

natural environment, as a form of wealth. And they search for various modes of association and integration. We can easily find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma: Does the process of integration – which is obviously urgent today – allow for the huge diversity of systems, standards, symbols, contents, etc., that European countries have developed in their various histories (in particular in culture and education)? The second: What risks would we bring to the process of integration if we demanded the strict harmonization of all these contents, symbols, and systems?

In this direction, a new political philosophy has been elaborated, which offers new approaches to a solution of the dilemma in question. As an example of this new philosophy – not only valid for the European Union – we can refer to the Amsterdam Treaty (1999). When dealing with education, vocational training, and youth (Chapter 3), it clearly states that “the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation among Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity”.¹ The Amsterdam Treaty further states that measures shall be adopted “excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulations of the Member States”.²

For us, today, it is of no importance that the European Union and the “Bologna Club” do not have the same composition. The philosophy traced above is applicable in both cases. Obviously, “Bologna” is not a harmonization decree. It is a *declaration*: it is an understanding of challenges,³ and it is an expression of a common will to create a *European Higher Education Area*. It is not founded on outvoting or overruling but rather on discussions and searching for consensus. From this point of view, “the European educational system” or “the European curriculum” does not exist, nor do the signatory countries wish to establish it. There are European educational systems and curricula, but there is also an understanding that cultural diversity means advantages and richness⁴ as well as the idea that this richness cannot be mutually enjoyed if we do not create “common roads” to link us together.⁵

Richness is the end, and “common roads” are (only) the means. But the necessary means! Therefore, entering the Bologna Club is a serious decision. It is not only a verbal note to neighbours; it also requires hard work at national level to connect the local infrastructure to agreed upon “common roads”: readable and comparable degrees, quality assurance, promotion of mobility, etc.

¹ See the *Amsterdam Treaty* (1999), Article 149, Point 1.

² *Ibid.*, Article 150, Point 4.

³ “A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognized as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space.” See the *Bologna Declaration* (1999), introductory section.

⁴ “[The] Ministers reaffirmed that efforts to promote mobility must be pursued in order to enable students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff to benefit from the richness of the European Higher Education Area including its democratic values, diversity of cultures and languages, and the diversity of the higher education systems.” – See the *Prague Communiqué* (2001), section on *Continued follow-up*.

⁵ “[The] Ministers committed themselves to continue their co-operation based on the objectives set out in the Bologna Declaration, building on the similarities and benefiting from the differences between cultures, languages and national systems, and drawing on all possibilities of intergovernmental co-operation and the ongoing dialogue with European universities and other higher education institutions and student organizations as well as the Community programmes” – See the *Prague Communiqué* (2001), introductory section.

TOWARDS CURRICULAR MODERNIZATION: INSTITUTIONAL PREREQUISITES

At the follow-up meetings, in particular, since Prague 2001, the idea of “higher education as a public responsibility” has often been stressed. In the process of building a European Higher Education Area it has become evident that there should be clear *public* responsibilities, for instance, an “easily readable and comparable” degree structure, a framework for equal access, a provision for quality assurance, a framework for academic autonomy, and the democratic governance of higher education institutions. Obviously, these responsibilities are not in opposition to academic autonomy. They only have to mark a framework for its efficient realization. There is also a very strong consensus that these public responsibilities convey *no public monopoly* for the concrete provision of higher education, the academic definitions of knowledge and truth, etc.

Autonomous higher education institutions are as important as prerequisites for the development of the European Higher Education Area as they are for the concrete modernization of curricula. This reality was already quite clear in 1988 when numerous Rectors of European universities gathered in Bologna – “four years before the definitive abolition of boundaries between the countries of the European Community”,⁶ and, as we can add today, two years before the fall of the Berlin wall, and signed *Magna Charta Universitatum*. The first of its fundamental principles: “The University is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises, and hands down culture by research and training. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.”⁷

Since the beginning of the 1990s, in fundamentally changed political circumstances, at least echoes of these ideas have often been reflected in the various policy documents on the development of European higher education. The idea of academic freedom and the proper relationship between the Government and higher education has been an issue of serious discussion, particularly in the former socialist countries. These discussions have often followed the *logic of a pendulum*: the former, almost total, dependence on political activities, gave way to an “autistic” position, one that lost sight of the *public* mission of the university.⁸ The fact that the universities of former Yugoslavia were only a weak association of independent faculties only strengthened this tendency, thus making transition more difficult.

Here, one can take the case of Slovenia. Owing to the specific circumstances of the country, social transition, in general, as well as the transformation of the higher education system occurred much more easily than in other countries, but, still, not without difficulties.

⁶ *Magna Charta Universitatum*. Bologna, 18 september 1988, (Rome: S.E.P.S., 1991, p. 59). Further on, one reads that “at the approaching end of this millenium the future of mankind depends largely on cultural, scientific, and technical development” and that “task of spreading knowledge among younger generations implies that, in today’s world,” universities “must also serve to society as a whole”, etc.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For more detailed elaboration of this thesis, see ZGAGA, Pavel, “Autonomia, not Autarkeia”; in, WOLFF, K. D. ed., *Autonomy and External Control: The University in Search of the Golden Mean. The Erfurt Declaration towards the Responsible University of the Twenty-first Century. Erfurter Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung und Wissenschaftspolitik, Vol. 2.* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag GmbH, 1997), pp. 111-126.

A new *Higher Education Act* was approved in 1993 that respected the principle of deregulation. It lays down a systemic framework, while the universities are left to define the details in their Statutes. New legislation states that the university is the legal entity, not the faculties. This provision gave rise to numerous discussions. The discussions did not avoid consideration of the relationship between the university and the Government; however, they became particularly heated so far as the relationships among “member institutions” (faculties, art academies, colleges) and the university were concerned. The highest level of dispute occurred with regard to the adoption of the new Statutes, more precisely, in defining the composition and the membership of university senates. The number of disciplines offered was not identical to the number of member institutions. In the opinion of many of the participants in the debate, the legislative principle that the senate should be elected “in such a manner that all scientific, art, and professional disciplines be equally represented”⁹ was not adhered to. In fact, actions, according to this principle, would have been very difficult to accomplish, for, during the earlier period, the same disciplines had developed in various faculties, but, in principle, each one had had to struggle alone to assume its academic, financial, and political position and power.

Soon after the adoption of the new Statutes, the constitutionality of some of the issues that had been raised were assessed by the Constitutional Court. Several faculties and individual professors initiated legal action to assess the constitutionality of certain stipulations of the University Statutes as well as those of the *Higher Education Act*. The most radical was an initiative to review the constitutionality of the whole act, the plaintiffs alleging that the *Higher Education Act* as such violated the guarantee of university autonomy embodied in Article 58 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia: “State universities and other institutions of higher education shall be autonomous. The founding of these institutions shall be regulated by statute”. In spite of the radical character of the initiative that gave it a potentially humorous tone, it triggered a number of serious discussions and controversies. There was sufficient of time to deal with them because the decision of the Constitutional Court was delivered three years later.

The Slovenian Constitutional Court (that like such courts in other countries included also university professors) ruled on all the initiatives in the Spring of 1998. As far as the issue of autonomy was concerned, the Court stated that “A fully autonomous social subsystem is an intrinsically contradictory notion: if it is fully autonomous, then it is no longer social nor a subsystem”.¹⁰ The decision further stated that the *Higher Education Act* was unconstitutional only so far as it stipulated that university member institutions were also autonomous. The decision required the legislative body to make this provision clear by passing an amendment within a year. The Court also repealed the provisions of the law regulating the composition of university senates which violated the principle of equal representation for scientific disciplines.

Two important lessons were learned from this decision. Academic autonomy is no doubt constitutionally guaranteed; however, the Higher Education Act should define the relationship between this social subsystem and social complexity in order to affirm its role in the social subsystem. Moreover, the academic autonomy, of

⁹ *Higher Education Act* (1993), Article 21. As a consequence of this stipulation, a crucial issue arose inside the framework of academic autonomy: How should the university Statute define the procedure for the election of the Rector? Who (how many representatives) has a right to vote? Can students vote? Etc.

¹⁰ *Official Gazette RS*, 18 (1998).

“independent” faculties cannot be legally guaranteed in regard to an “independent” university.

Despite this clear message, the transition from the former system of independent faculties¹¹ to a re-integration of the university has been a long process that has yet to be fully completed. However, awareness of the growing internationalization of higher education, the wish and the need to strengthen the position of Slovenian higher education in the international academic community and to benefit from as well as to contribute to the common richness have been convincing factors. International co-operation is possible only if certain common instruments, “quality assurance”, “a system of credits”, “mobility schemes”, “easily readable and comparable degrees”, etc., are developed. If there are no common instruments of this type, even within a single university organized as a loose association of independent faculties, then there is very little hope of being able to successfully cope with contemporary global challenges.

The Bologna process assumes that these problems are already solved. It assumes that universities and other higher education institutions are autonomous – and therefore accountable – institutions.¹² It also assumes that universities are communities of teachers *and* students,¹³ and that, therefore, there should be a place for students in university governance. These assumptions are institutional prerequisites for successful curricular modernization.

TOWARDS CURRICULAR MODERNIZATION: PROBLEMS AND OPEN ISSUES

The above-stated premises have dealt mainly with general issues. This last section tackles various concrete questions concerning the processes of contemporary academic curricular modernization, that is, with the Bologna process in mind. It seems, that from this point of view, the major question is the reform of degree structures.

The proposed BA-MA structure is sometimes very close to and sometimes very distant from the various national traditions in Europe. South East Europe falls without the latter group, however, it is not the only region with these concerns, particularly the question of two formulae: 3+2? or 4+1?

Of course, it should be clearly stated here that the process of establishing a European Area of Higher Education cannot be reduced to such simplistic arithmetic. The reform envisaged demands considerable more than that. One has to avoid false

¹¹ In fact, Yugoslav “independent faculties” were only a variation of the well known-old tune, *Divide et impera*, which was invented by the former regime in dealing with the protests of late 1960s and early 1970s.

¹² [The] “Ministers stressed that the involvement of universities and other higher education institutions and of students as competent, active, and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed. The institutions have demonstrated the importance they attach to the creation of a compatible and efficient, yet diversified and adaptable European Higher Education Area. Ministers also pointed out that quality is the basic underlying condition for trust, relevance, mobility, compatibility, and attractiveness in the European Higher Education Area. Ministers expressed their appreciation of the contributions toward developing study programmes combining academic quality with relevance to lasting employability and called for a continued proactive role of higher education institutions”. See the *Prague Communiqué* (2001), section on *Higher Education Institutions and Students*.

¹³ [The] “Ministers affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organization and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions. Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process”.

expectations, for no “minor changes” will make a new Bachelor’s Degree possible. On the contrary only “blood, sweat, and tears” can be promised. Higher education is not a game of dominos according to which the problem is the appropriate *form*. Higher education has to do with *contents*. The real problem is that higher education in this border region shares the tradition of long curricula, which are not compatible with the Bologna goals. How to adapt this tradition to these goals? Which helps best – radical or gradual methods?

The first step should be to analyze the *Bologna Declaration*, for at this point, it, once again, states the following:

Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.¹⁴

It is clear that the *Declaration* does not impose a final solution. There are two main cycles of studies. The first cycle of studies lasts a minimum of three years. Both cycles are “relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification”. The second cycle “leads to the master and/or doctorate degree”. It is true that certain other surveys must be considered. These were presented at Bologna or on later occasions. Nevertheless, these statements give a great deal of space for further discussion making clear that, in a diversified Europe, simplistic solutions are not possible.

Curricular changes open conceptual issues. Those not only deal with the duration of studies as a pure quantitative category. There is also the question of relevance for the European labour market. Thus, the issue must be taken seriously at national as well as institutional level. It should be elaborated in terms of structures (for instance, the former Yugoslav *Magistar* cannot be compared at all to the “Master’s” Degree either in terms of teaching methods or of contents. An analysis should be made of how employers would react to these changes and how new degrees would fit the academic requirements, for instance, Doctoral studies.

In certain cases, envisaged curricular reforms should be radical. Take, for instance, the question of traditional teaching philosophy. It starts from the traditionally assumed knowledge of teachers, while modern descriptions of Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees are expressed in terms of learning outcomes and the competencies of undergraduate students *versus* graduates.¹⁵ Meeting this requirement requires much more than only a formal adaptation of the existing (traditional) curricula.

Similar problems arise in establishing credit systems (ECTS). Again, even here the demand is not for a simple arithmetic procedure (the recalculation of teaching hours to learning credits), nor for “technical modernization”. Introduction of a credit system brings forward a fundamental change in teaching philosophy. It requires a “student-centered” approach, that is, a transition from mere “lecturing” to encouraging independent study and research on the part of students, a scandal from

¹⁴ *Bologna Declaration* (1999).

¹⁵ See the report, “Towards Shared Descriptors for Bachelors and Masters”; *in*, <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/en/bologna_seminars/index.htm>.

the point of view of traditional teaching philosophy! Credit points are not given simply for listening to lectures.

In certain academic environments, the establishment of a credit system is even more provocative in the way it affects the symbolic but material (or power) status of the university teacher. As the gathering of information shows, the existing curricula in most countries of the region are overloaded. The general rule is that teaching hours and the direct workload of students (lectures, seminars, etc.) exceed twenty-five or even thirty hours per week.¹⁶ In these circumstances, it is almost impossible to engage in independent study and research. These circumstances have arisen mostly as a result of the strange rules governing the financing of higher education (more hours per student – more money per faculty member); however, these circumstances should also be taken very seriously and eliminated in the envisaged approach to the Bologna goals.

It is thus evident that the problem is not only the duration of existing undergraduate curricula (five years on the average), but also the weekly workload of students. Therefore, existing curricula should be reduced. No doubt there is a great deal of ballast that can be eliminated without causing any academic damage. Given that as the content is reduced and parallel changes are made in terms of the teaching and learning methodology, academic quality will only improve.

At this point, one should ask: why 3+2 (or 4+1)? Why a two-cycle system? One should not forget that higher education has changed fundamentally over the last thirty years. First of all, it is no longer élitist. It has become a mass phenomenon. In most of the developed countries, the proportion of young people who enter higher education institutions is 50 percent or more. These objective circumstances, that have led to a demand for vastly increased access, also call for the increased efficiency of higher education systems. In this new situation, higher education institutions are forced to deal with an issue which they ignored while they catered to an élite: that of reducing the drop-out rate. More to the point, as the universities lost their élitist character, the democratic nature of the surrounding society became increasingly pronounced. An important issue of any higher education institution in the “open societies” of today is how it copes with the issue of recruiting students with special needs, from marginal groups and from ethnic minorities.

Higher education is increasingly coming into a situation whereby it must meet varying demands linked to decisive factors of success or failure. Modern societies are mobile societies in various ways. Education is an increasingly important factor in the facilitation of vertical social mobility. People change their residences and places of employment, wish to study, etc. Higher education structures can foster or hinder these processes – a fundamental reason why it is necessary to reconsider these structures and to find new solutions to problems – not only at national but also at international level.

As an answer to these questions, the idea of flexible paths has arisen: general qualification to be followed by specialized qualification, life-long learning, etc. The old rigid curricula have encountered problems. Systems are now increasingly open and provide increasing space for elective and optional subjects. Transfers from one course programme to another are required, and the credit system – including transfer and cumulative credits – has been a natural answer to all these challenges. Now these

¹⁶ Given that sixty credit points makes one year of study, according to ECTS, curricula loaded with thirty or more teaching hours per week would produce a strange academic effect best called credit-inflation.

processes are taking place on a global scale. We need to analyze our own positions and prepare to act.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

This study tackles only certain issues of relevance. There are many others; their list is long. Instead of providing a systemic conclusion, we shall tackle two other concrete issues that move beyond the walls of the university.

The first issue is that the binary model of higher education: *university* and *non-university* (polytechnic, college, etc.) studies. In fact, the matter is no longer a dilemma: non-university studies have achieved their place in the sun. Many arguments support their continued development. However, the existence of a non-university sector and its relation to the university sector raise questions which are very important for the processes of curricular modernization. Sometimes, the non-university sector is closely linked to universities. Is it academically legitimate to share certain teachers? Is it legitimate to provide the same type of teaching? Can we agree that differentiation is more or less a question of academic quality? What about transfers of students from one sector to another? Are they permitted and under what conditions? Although it would be almost impossible to answer all these questions at this point, they should make up part of a future agenda.

The other remaining issue is the relationship of higher education to the secondary and primary education sectors. There are plenty of problems in the region today with compulsory and upper secondary education. Actions should be taken to improve teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools, in particular, to improve the preparation of future students in higher education. In a given situation, universities sometimes complain that they have to fill the gaps left over from the lower levels of education. It is necessary to stress that a university should not be a place for correcting deficiencies in secondary and primary education that incoming first-years students have received. It would be very good to offer preparatory courses for academically unprepared students; however, the university shall not overload its existing curricula with the unrealized aims of upper-secondary education.

Last, but not least, it is necessary to admonish all the universities in the region of the need to engage seriously in teacher education, to include it among other academic disciplines, and to give it the status that it has, by law, in other European countries.¹⁷ But this issue is one for the next meeting.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the *Green Paper on Teacher Education in Europe*. Umeå: Umeå universitat, 2000, <<http://tntee.umu.se/publications/greenpaper.html>>