

REFORM TRENDS IN EUROPE'S HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES AS AN EXEMPLIFICATION OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AFTER THE ROME 2020 MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

Marcin SKINDER^{1*}, Żaneta SKINDER²

¹ Politechnika Bydgoska; marcin.skinder@pbs.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-5876-8977

² Collegium Medicum UMK; z.skinder@cm.umk.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-6168-2189

* Correspondence author

Purpose: The subject of the study is issues related to the reform of higher education systems taking into account the Bologna Process. As a theoretical and cognitive goal, the author adopted the presentation of the categories and conditions of the Bologna Process in its roman stage (2020).

Design/methodology/approach: The article adopts methodological elements specific to the field of social sciences, including the monographic method. It is implemented in this work as a way of researching specific, individual cases and focuses on the overall recognition of one relevant problem. It is important here to verify each element of the phenomenon in question and focus on the individual components of the issue addressed based on qualitative-descriptive elements. The paper draws on the printed publications of authors such as Irina Ferencz, Agnieszka Olechnicka, Tim Birtwistle, Robert Wagenaar, Jurgen Enders, Jeroen Huisman and continuous prints, including: *Edukacja Ekonomistów i Menedżerów*, *Forum Akademickie*, *Education*, *Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Śląskiej*, *Studia Prawno-Ekonomiczne*, *Białostockie Studia Prawnicze* and *Studia Prawnoustrojowe*.

Findings: The research problem was framed by the question: what changes are possible to implement in European higher education, under the Bologna harmonization formula, after the announcement of the Rome Communiqué in 2020?

Practical implications: The practical objective was defined in the form of comments relevant to the needs for changes in the course of the Bologna Process with regard to multidegree education, quality assurance and recognition of periods of education, the social dimension of the Bologna Process and the internationalization of higher education.

Originality/value: The study consists of three rudimentary parts, including a characterisation of the development of higher education and the implications for the region, and an analysis of the Bologna Process and its benefits for European higher education, as well as its most recent implications for higher education systems after the Rome 2020 conference. This characterisation fits into the thematic area of education management understood as a potential of the European region. This article addresses the issue of higher education development as a factor in regional development and aims to analyse the most up-to-date desiderata for harmonising higher education systems in Europe, particularly those raised at the Rome 2020 Ministerial Conference.

Keywords: Higher (tertiary) education, Bologna Process, harmonisation.

Category of the paper: Conceptual paper.

1. Introduction: the development of tertiary education and implications for the region

Tertiary education is often discussed in various public debates, the issue of its quality level, the objectives pursued, as well as the various matters of the educational entities related to academic activities. Particularly important seem to be those forming relations with regional economic entities, which may constitute development opportunities for citizens forming social capital in this arrangement.

Fundamental to this arrangement may be the educational projects which, through various deidentifications, serve to reform higher education, universities and the entire academic environment. The formula for some of these (in terms of harmonising the higher education system) has been exhausted, this applies to the Lisbon strategy and the Copenhagen process. Still active in terms of reforming this educational environment is the Bologna Process. The discourse in the social debate on the role of higher education institutions in socio-economic development processes, mentioned in the introduction, is based on the thesis that academic actors have the task of initiating reforms at the local level, but that they should also become involved in the global dimension. This broader dimension takes into account the contribution to sustainable development of regional communities, as well as entire countries, through the offer of education, modification of the organisation of higher education institutions, which, in the long term, may result in increasing levels of such indicators as enrolment or employability of graduates. Thus, the fundamental role of higher education institutions should be to contribute to the development of the region, which may be realised through teaching, scientific and research activities. In the first perspective, relevant study programmes are important, which can be adapted to the needs of the region, taking into account, for example, the proposals of external stakeholders, i.e. people, communities, institutions, organisations, offices, which, on the basis of the feedback principle, can influence schools, most often these are institutions constituting the academic environment, entering into relations with it.

Scientific activity and the application of its results in theory and practice should be the main objectives of academic schools. Through the high quality of scientific activity and the fostering of cooperation and knowledge exchange between scientists, institutions and the business community, there is a process of engagement in the socio-economic life of the region. This quality is understood as the output of Polish businesses in terms of publication activities. Jointly authored scientific articles and books reflect a certain type of cooperation between the business and scientific sectors. Both those publications co-authored by representatives of

science and business and those written independently, without the participation of academics, involve some kind of cooperation, including direct contacts, simultaneous employment of the co-author in the scientific sector or completed research projects carried out jointly with research and development institutions (Olechnicka, 2012).

In terms of research activity, on the other hand, it is significant to argue that schools are no longer isolating themselves, they do not maintain elite production by force. Rather, they function as centres of social development, catalysts for social, economic and political change. In addition to their teaching and research functions, referred to in the literature as the first and second missions, contemporary higher education institutions perform another task important for the well-being of societies, namely the development of relations with the socio-economic environment. This task is defined as the third mission of HEIs, understood narrowly and in which case the definitions emphasise cooperation with business and entities operating solely for the purpose of profit maximisation. One can also point to the ministerially-driven broader cooperation of HEIs with different types of entities operating in the economic sphere (non-governmental organisations) and administrative entities (local government, educational and medical institutions). It is also impossible to overlook the benefits for the cooperating entities, which gain reliable knowledge on their activities and substantive support to be used in current or investment activities (Kola, 2017; Kauf, Stec, 2017, p. 94).

The development of regions and their economic players requires access to modern technology and laboratories. In this connection, the activities of universities, where science and business can come together and which can drive various innovation processes, are indeed gaining in importance. It should be a priority for European countries to support those who engage in such cooperation between science and industry, including the commercialisation of research results. The transfer of knowledge to industry and the resulting feedback loop in the form of commercialisation can bring many benefits to society. This is mainly about linking science to production, commerce, finance and health care. The academic nature of science developing within the walls of universities should be replaced by pragmatic activities responding to the real needs of the market and the economy (Kuna-Marszałek, Lisowska, 2013, p. 31).

2. Characteristics of the Bologna Process

The exemplification of Europe as a region or set of regions, understood as units of territorial organisation in states, irrespective of their legal form, with a relatively large area and a significant population, economically and socially homogeneous, in which an appropriate economic and social policy is pursued, is at the same time an area of influence for various educational and social processes. These can include, those with less impact or which have

historically been exhausted, including the development plan known as the Lisbon Strategy (2000) and the Copenhagen Process (2002). In the area of the European region, the Bologna Process has been successfully operating, the desiderations of which, known since 1999, have, in this view, rarely been analysed (Skinder, 2006).

The Bologna Process is a socio-educational project and exemplifies the harmonisation of the higher education system. Its practical dimension was initiated by the Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, whose main objective was to achieve the *European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*, which took place in 2010. The fundamental decisions of the document, including the use of the ECTS system, multidegree study and quality assurance of education, reformed the higher education systems of most countries in the European region. The results of the activities of the participants in the Bologna Process are announced in the framework of periodically organised conferences and communiqués of higher education ministers in important European cities for harmonisation (Bologna, Berlin, Paris, London, Leuven, Bergen, Bucharest, Vienna, Rome and Yerevan). The activity of the Member states, understood as the activities of the *Bologna Follow Up Group* (now the *Bologna Implementation and Coordination Group*) and the Member states (currently 48) in the Bologna Process from 1999 to 2023 included the following provisions, which were successively implemented in national academic systems in the form of desiderations. These include enhancing the employability of graduates, supporting mobility processes, improving the inclusive nature of higher education systems in the context of demographic challenges, offering a diploma supplement, distance learning (*lifelong learning*) (Huisman et al., 2012; Enders, 2011; Chmielecka, 2019; Bologna Process, 1999; Birtwistle, Wagenaar, 2020; Wagenaar, 2019, pp. 15-53; Skinder, 2021).

3. Implications of the Bologna process for European higher education systems after the Rome 2020 conference

The benefits of implementing the Bologna decisions are also accentuated in other areas of activity. In 2020, a ministerial conference was held in Rome, where ministers announced the most recent developments in the Bologna process. It confirmed the strengthening of the social dimension in higher education, understood as the enhancement of the competences of academic staff and the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI). The knotty initiatives and processes currently facing the implementers of the harmonisation of European higher education concern the achievement of the new 2025 shape, in which it may be important to build a cooperation network of European universities aimed at more effective language teaching, as well as to ensure equal mobility opportunities, understood as the movement of teachers and students for educational purposes across Europe on an *Erasmus* basis (European Education..., 2020).

In Rome 2020 (the Rome stage of the process), further desiderations were identified which, in relation to the current needs of European higher education systems, have become most relevant for the course of effective harmonisation. This thesis is multidirectional and takes into account the needs of the majority of higher education institutions in the Bologna Process member states, the quantitative status of which can be analysed in the statistical reports produced by the *Eurydice* network (European Education..., 2020; Skinder, 2015, p. 165).

In harmonising European higher education after Rome (2020), it is proving most important to focus on five rudimentary lines of action, including **improving multidegree education (particularly doctoral studies), quality assurance and recognition of periods of study, the social dimension of the Bologna Process and the internationalisation of higher education**, which are also necessary to improve national higher education.

With regard to multidegrees, it is important to further develop degree structures for convergence (convergence) defined as a relative reduction of the educational distance between the Bologna Process Member States (EHEA). It has to be stressed that there are difficulties in implementing such a defined (convergent) degree structure across Europe, so it has not been possible to consolidate the degree model for any of the degrees (one encounters degree programmes with a load of 180 ECTS credits for the first degree and 120 for the subsequent degree giving a total of 300 credits, as well as 360 in eastern countries, which may be due to the higher workload of first degree programmes). A problem in the convergence (compatibility) process are study programmes that do not fit into the harmonisation principles, due to the specific requirements of regulated professions, as well as those that cannot be linked to the structure of the three degrees, although they can successfully respond to specific needs related to professional development and lifelong learning (European Education..., 2020, p. 60).

With regard to quality assurance, it is worth noting the three phases of the introduction of this desideration announced in ministerial communications from 1999 to 2007, then 2007 to 2012 and in communications after 2012. In the first stage, the shape of the quality assurance desiderate, including its procedures implemented by internal and external institutions, was only discussed. The second phase consolidated the findings and in the third phase the quality assurance framework was developed in conjunction with automatic recognition, the link to the EHEA Qualifications Framework and the concept of joint programmes. The achievement of the EHEA in 2010 confirmed that most member states have their own internal and external quality assurance systems, and there has been a shift towards internationalisation of, hitherto, national, external quality assurance systems, which has started to generate disputes in some member states. This refers to the *European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)* already implemented in the EHEA as a mechanism for ensuring compliance with the ESG (*European Standards and Guidelines*), which were published with the Bergen Ministerial Communiqué in 2005 and an updated form was adopted at the 2015 Ministerial Conference in Yerevan (European Education..., 2020, p. 89; Chmielecka, 2015, p. 29; Skinder, 2015, p. 159).

With regard to recognition, it can be said that the implementers of the Bologna Process have, with varying degrees of success, focused on simplifying the recognition procedures, taking into account the provisions made in the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). It must be underlined that these attempts have not always had the desired effect and there are still obstacles to overcome, which mainly relate to problems of mutual comparability of learning outcomes (European Education..., 2020, p. 89).

With regard to the social dimension of the Bologna Process, it can be said that its main principles were formulated long ago, as in the London Communiqué (London Communiqué, 2007; Skinder, 2021, p. 535). It was about the empowerment of students, whose population in Europe should reflect the diversity pertaining to underrepresented and vulnerable groups, which failed. Among the member states, only a small number of countries have implemented a coherent system that takes into account the social dimension and its objectives, which illustrates insufficient progress and is linked to the subjectivity of interpretation with regard to relevant aspects of diversity. *The Eurostudent* project, which provides a database on the diverse living conditions of students, was to become a solution to this problem. Still, the fundamental goal of widening participation in higher education (especially for migrants) is still insufficient, both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. Under-representation rates apply to women in some fields of study, although there are quite a number of them studying overall. There are too few older people studying, and there are barriers to the education of students, in this group of countries where the labour market situation has not completely improved after the economic crisis (European Education..., 2020, pp. 121-122).

With regard to internationalisation, it must be underlined that, although it was not immediately included in the stand-alone harmonisation deidentifications from the outset, it quickly dominated the work of the preparatory group (*Bologna Follow Up Group*, BFUG). Perhaps the process was associated with internationalisation and no need was seen to specifically isolate it (at least at the initial stage). This can be measured by student participation in mobility (*Erasmus*), which has increased in the last twenty years, although there is an unevenness, determined by the attractiveness of various areas. The target of reaching a rate of a fifth of students going abroad by 2020 was not achieved, not even approaching an average of 10%, which may mean that the assumptions made at the end of the first decade of the 2000s were overestimated or that weaker increases in overall student numbers were not taken into account. It is worth emphasising, however, that if only the second tertiary level of education were taken into account, the rates would be much higher. Internationalisation as understood in terms of mobility can gain momentum through recognition mechanisms, ECTS credits, the diploma supplement, and through multidegree mobility, whereby it is possible to move through degrees in higher education institutions all over Europe, and the assumptions of joint study programmes are also used in this process (European Education..., 2020, pp. 155-156; Wesołowska, 2013, p. 382; Communiqué Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 2009; Ferencz, 2015, pp. 27-28; Gorylev, 2019).

4. Summary and conclusions

The continuation of the Bologna Process, following the announcement of the Communiqué of the Ministers of Higher Education of Rome (2020), needs to continue, and it seems necessary to update the current statements in the direction of forms that meet the harmonisation requirements of today. Still, among the catalogue of reforms needed, **the statements of multidegree education (especially as regards doctoral studies), quality assurance and recognition of periods of study, the social dimension of the Bologna Process and the internationalisation of higher education** must be included.

With regard to multidegree education, an important aspect is to ensure and optimise the transparency of the offer in the different countries. The attribution of ECTS credits and their positioning in national qualification frameworks should solve the underlying problems. As the analysis in the text shows, some countries are already using these tools and others are considering their introduction, which requires further cooperation and more widespread collaboration between countries. In terms of degree structure, there are still many systems that require external quality assurance agencies to monitor the implementation of standardised ECTS. All EHEA countries (except Russia and Belarus: on 11 April 2022, the membership of Belarus and Russia was suspended due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and on 6 June 2022 a decision was taken to remove these countries from the programme) have introduced the diploma supplement and met all ministerial obligations. In addition, national qualification frameworks in line with EHEA standards have been introduced virtually everywhere. The implementation of these key commitments gives hope for the continuation of well-chosen educational pathways based on knowledge, acquired knowledge, skills and competences that correspond to their personal goals and societal needs in specific Bologna member states.

With regard to quality assurance, it must be pointed out that the development of quality assurance systems in accordance with EHEA standards is crucial to guaranteeing high quality standards throughout Europe, which significantly strengthens confidence in higher education systems. Not all countries, however, are ready to allow the quality of higher education institutions to be evaluated by an entity based in a foreign country, albeit one belonging to EQAR, and only such an evaluation is considered fully objective and contributes to further strengthening trust, so this practice needs further improvement. Perhaps harmonisation efforts should focus on mechanisms to increase the level of trust in pro-quality institutions coming from abroad.

With regard to recognition, the actions confirmed at the Rome Ministerial Conference (previously in Yerevan and Paris) should be continued. Indeed, most of the countries in the EHEA have not fully implemented the Lisbon Convention, and this applies in particular to the situation of refugees and their situation as described in Chapter VII of the LRC (Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications, 1997). Although many countries claim to aim for automatic

recognition of other countries' diplomas, less than half of the higher education systems of EHEA member states actually implement this, and rarely which do so effectively and unconditionally for all students. Thus, most higher education systems need a continuation of reforms to allow students automatic access to higher education abroad.

With regard to the social dimension of the Bologna process, there is a lot of to do. Perhaps it is a question of the broad spectrum of activities and the considerable time span of the proceedings needed. Relevant here may be the application of the benchmarking formula, which always requires an outlay of time and work through a step-by-step action, first analysing and then implementing best practices to learn from each other. Certainly, the implementation of extensive research and the stimulation of cooperation between universities and the business sector to create new jobs and enrich the educational offer needs to continue. There is still not enough to eliminate financial and cultural barriers (especially in Western countries) and to ensure access to markets and schools for disadvantaged groups (social). There is also a need to strengthen the participation of the Bologna Process member states in *the Eurostudent* programme, whose participation is still far below the number of all Bologna countries, which significantly weakens the collection of data on the existence of European graduates.

With regard to the internationalisation, too, there is still much to be done, especially with regard to supporting disadvantaged students in such a way that mobility that promotes the process of social inclusion can be truly effective. It may be worthwhile to take advantage of the wide range of *e-learning*, including *blended learning* understood as a blended, or better, complementary process. The dissemination of new ICT technologies is triggering significant changes in the support of learning by electronic solutions, as has been demonstrated in foreign language education. *Blended learning* as a combination of traditional and electronic training can be relevant here for educational effectiveness.

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