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Europeanization of European Universities. Between Two Currents of Changes

Summary:

There are two driving forces of Europeanization within higher education: the *Bologna Process* and European Union policies and activities. The *Bologna Process*, started as the voluntary agreement of ministers, provided a stable framework for interchangeable and compatible education, thus promoting student and faculty mobility. The European Union, although enjoying institutional and political power, was rather interested in sponsoring mobility financially. Thanks to the interplay of these two forces, the 'European dimension' in higher education has emerged, thus making it more desirable around the world.

KEYWORDS

higher education policy, mobility, ERASMUS programme, Bologna process

EUROPEIZACJA UCZELNI W EUROPIE. POŚRÓD DWÓCH NURTÓW PRZEMIAN

Streszczenie

Istnieją dwie główne przyczyny europeizacji w szkolnictwie wyższym: proces boloński oraz polityka i działania Unii Europejskiej. Proces boloński, rozpoczęty za sprawą dobrowolnego porozumienia ministrów, stworzył stabilny system kompatybilnej i komplementarnej edukacji, umożliwiający większą mobilność studentów i kadry naukowej. Unia Europejska, chociaż dysponuje większym zapleczem instytucjonalnym, skupiła się na finansowym wspieraniu rozwijającej się mobilności. Dzięki oddziaływaniu wspomnianych dwóch sił narodził się „wymiar europejski” w szkolnictwie wyższym, co przyczynia się do zwiększania jego atrakcyjności wśród studentów i profesorów z całego świata.

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polityka wobec szkolnictwa wyższego, mobilność, program Erasmus, proces boloński

SETTING THE CONTEXT

The university was born in Europe. Members of the academia recall with pride long tradition of research and education started in 1088 in Bologna. The name of this oldest university in continuous operation is important not only because of the history. One of the most important documents, changing the nature of mobility and collaboration among European universities and systems of higher education was signed in Bologna in 1999. *Bologna Declaration* set the foundations of the 21st century changes in European curricula and stimulated student mobility across the continent. *Bologna Declaration* because of its historic context is a perfect reflection of the higher education: combination of tradition and modernity; past and future. University education, reaching always for new fields of inquiry, aiming at analyzing the challenges of modern societies, is the source and the explanation of the 21st century Europeanization [Gaston and Schneider 2010, pp. 18-30; Dobbins 2011, pp. 22-29].

Bologna Process, started with the signing of *Bologna Declaration*, is just one of the driving forces for the changes of European higher

education. The other most important actor is the European Union which has been using its institutional power to stimulate higher education institutions (HEIs) and strengthen their role in society and economy. The *Treaty Establishing the European Community* stated in the article 150 that any action of the European Community must exclude “any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States,” the very same article is repeated in the *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*. EU member states have retained the exclusive right to regulate and control all levels of education, but the EU took the obligation to enhance the quality of education, develop the European dimension, encourage mobility of students and teachers, and promote cooperation among educational institutions [*Consolidated Version of the Treaty*].

Bologna Declaration emphasizes the importance of the promotion of

the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research [*The Bologna Declaration 1999*, p. 4].

In a strange way these two forces overlap in shaping HEIs in EU member states and other not only European countries by promoting “the European dimension” or Europeanization of national systems of higher education. There is still one critical question: what is the meaning of Europeanization as applied to universities and colleges? How is this process influenced by global changes and growing internationalization of higher education? Can political commitment of the European Union and ministers responsible for higher education stimulate further changes?

Poland, as the active and founding member of European Higher Education Area and EU member state since 2004, can be used as the testing ground for the implementation of intended policy of Europeanization. The critical-empirical method seems to be the most appropriate method to test and evaluate policy frames that shapes and characterize actual national higher education policies. The critical-empirical method helps to reach for the conclusions on the interdependencies between adopted policies and outcomes reflecting the Europeanization [St. John, Daun-Barnett and Moronski-Chapman 2013, pp. 15-16; St. John 2007].

The critical-empirical method enables also to trace two main currents of Europeanization of universities: one based on voluntary actions of rectors (at first) and national ministers responsible for higher education (later); the other – based on political action of EU member states, willing to build European identity of younger generation. Within these two currents one can trace the rationale for the changes and outcomes of building more closely connected universities. The comparison of these currents leads to the answer what Europeanization of universities really means.

DECLARED: *BOLOGNA PROCESS!*

On June 19th, 1999, *Bologna Declaration* was signed by ministers responsible for higher education representing 29 European countries. (In case of Belgium, two ministers representing both communities put their signatures.) *Declaration* was a culmination of a larger process of discussing and preparing closer inter-institutional cross-border collaboration of European HEIs. Eleven years earlier rectors of universities that came to celebrate University of Bologna 900th anniversary of founding prepared and signed a document calling for closer bonds among institutions from various countries. It was to be modeled on the medieval tradition of students and scholars mobility. *Magna Charta Universitatum* represents the “grass root” activity of universities and colleges; activity that would not last too long without political support [Dobbins 2011, p. 57; Neave 2012, p. 20].

The rectors understood that necessary condition for successful mobility is by making programs of studies and diplomas conferred at various institutions more compatible. Therefore the final conclusion of *Magna Charta* was simple:

as in the earliest years of their history, they encourage mobility among teachers and students; furthermore, they consider a general policy of equivalent status, titles, examinations (without prejudice to national diplomas) and award of scholarships essential to the fulfillment of their mission in the conditions prevailing today [*Magna Charta* 1988, pp. 2].

The very first wave of structured Europeanization of universities was launched by “grass-root” activity of the institutions themselves. It

was based on medieval tradition of traveling scholars and students that crossed borders in quest for knowledge. There is fundamental difference between Middle Ages and 21st century: we do not one common language of instructions (although English is claiming to be Latin of modern times) and universities adhere to different educational traditions [Barnett 2010, pp. 11-20]. The concept proposed by university rectors was soon noticed by politicians: mainly ministers responsible for higher education.

The second step on the way to *Bologna Declaration* and *Bologna Process* took place in 1998 when ministers from France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom signed *Sorbonne Declaration*. It was pilot version of an agreement that was to promote inter-university mobility, transparency in higher education and mobility of labor force by creating compatible system of labor market qualifications. That was also the moment when ministers decided that introducing two cycles of studies, instead of having just one, usually five year program, would stimulate mobility: students would be able to move among institutions. Such new system, understandable for both employers and academics would make mobility not only possible but feasible and desirable [Field 2003, p. 184].

Widely known and used system of transferable credit points was introduced with the *Sorbonne Declaration*. The mobility once intended by rectors could not be effective without legal recognition of educational achievements from abroad. Therefore, once the ministers stepped in, the process of stronger ties and co-operation substantially accelerated. Promising results inspired politicians to move towards more open and broader collaboration among various systems of higher education. Understanding and appreciating the complexity of higher education systems across Europe, the ministers of 29 states signed the *Bologna Declaration*, in a moment when the European Union consisted of just 15 member states [Neave and Maassen, pp. 135-136].

The name of the document: *Bologna Declaration* reveals specific nature of the agreement signed and the fragile organizational basis of the process. There has been no permanent secretariat of any kind; the signees did not establish any institution to control the pace and the quality of changes. The only way of monitoring the *Bologna Process* is by biennial ministerial conferences, which also reflects the

power of every state belonging to the European Higher Education Area, the ultimate result of the Declaration. This is also the reason why the progress in providing more open, more European higher education varies from country to country [Neave and Maassen 2009, p. 138]. On the one hand adopting common system of European Credit Transfer System has not created any tensions; on the other hand: establishing two cycles of studies (usually three years for the first cycle and two more for the second) has aroused significant criticism from the academia [*Tertiary Education* 2004, pp. 7-10; Fulton et al. 2007, p. 41].

The example of Poland, co-founder of the European Higher Education Area, proves that political support has played important role in adopting fundamental assumptions of the *Bologna Process*. July 27th, 2005, Polish Parliament passed new act: *Law on Higher Education*. After seven years of “try-outs period” Poland accepted some key concepts, necessary for greater openness or Europeanization of Polish system of higher education. These changes included: general pattern of “3 plus 2” studies (except for medical professions, law and very few other); empowerment of the national accreditation committee (that was to accredit both institutions and programs of studies); placing ECTS at the foundations of any program of studies in Poland (first cycle should offer 180 ECTS points; second – 120 points; every semester should be worth 30 ECTS points) [*Law on Higher Education* 2005].

The OECD report on Polish higher education emphasized that Polish students are those who profit from European mobility, the share of the students going abroad is among the highest in Europe. Although there were instances when students coming back to home institution faced problems in using foreign credentials, the general pattern proves that both students and faculty members do not question the value of first-hand experience gained abroad. Polish way of accepting and adopting the *Bologna Process* proves that strong political commitment is essential for promoting institutional changes. These changes, however, have even greater effect than ever expected. The ‘European dimension’ that students and faculty members could feel during their stays abroad becomes formative component for ever greater cohort [Fulton et al. 2007, pp. 114-116].

HIGHER EDUCATION FOR EUROPEAN UNION?

The *Bologna Process* is based on voluntary decision of ministers responsible for higher education: this is the reason of the fragility of the system but also the foundation of its openness. Since its inception European Higher Education Area has been open to new states, therefore number of countries belonging to EHEA is far greater than number of EU member states. The *Bologna Process* does not have any special budget for advertising or promoting institutional and international activities. Any funds must be provided on the national level (with due respect to the realities of federal states, of course) [Dobbins 2011, pp. 168-170].

The European Union is based not on a voluntary declaration but on international treaties that have unquestionable binding force. The institutional system of the European Union provides financial and organizational support for the most important activities. Since the very beginnings of the European Communities there was a common understanding that higher education should have been of such priorities [Corbett 2005, p. 35]. The first attempt to incorporate higher education into common vision of public policy was by the means of the 'European University'. This concept resembles the first attempts of the federal government of the United States that planned to create one National University in the District of Columbia. Such institution was to serve the needs of the federation (demand for well-prepared administration) and educational ambitions of the youth (then they had to go to Europe in a quest for doctoral education) [Rybkowski 2012, pp. 89-100]. The European University was especially important for the European Atomic Energy Community – it was necessary to have top class institution for expended and expensive nuclear research. Rectors of European universities, led by West German conference of rectors, opposed the idea; they were afraid of European supranationalism that stood behind the project. Growing opposition resulted in changing the political approach to European visions of higher education.

The failure to create one strong European University gave impetus to a completely different approach. Appreciating the role of national governments in managing higher education affairs the next phase was marked by intergovernmental strategy, proposed during

a summit in Paris in February 1961. Charles de Gaulle expressed the need for greater

intergovernmental cooperation in foreign affairs, defence, cultural and scientific cooperation and education (...), [a]rguing that such cooperation would make the Community more politically effective [Corbett 2005, p. 49].

By the end of the decade Edgar Faure, French minister of education and the chairman of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education, stated that:

The European university, or if you like a European university community, and, through it, Europe itself, will help us to overcome our troubles and to solve the crisis undergone by the universities...

We must not permit Europe to be no more than a "geographical expression"...

I believe the time has come to seek to define together through the European university community, through educational Europe, a cultural pattern, a pattern of European civilisation... [Haig 1970, p. 133].

After the first enlargement of the Community on January 1st, 1973, newly appointed Commissioner for Education, Ralf Dahrendorf, received a report on education prepared by Henri Janne and commissioned by previous Commissioner. The report was to be the foundation of EC policy towards all levels of education, including university and college education. Very ambitious in vision and rather poor in details, the report stated that no effective economic and regional policies could exist without calling on training and education [Janne 1973, p. 13]. The approach proposed by Janne was based on four basic criteria: no interference with national structures; compensatory actions of EC; academic freedom; and the future policy should include other European countries [Haig 1970, p. 79].

This EC policy was based on subsidiarity long time before Treaty of Maastricht. The role of the EC institutions was to provide for higher education when the actions of national ministries and bilateral agreements could not help in solving problems. After many years free labor market across all member states was still rather the goal than a means. One of the reasons for lack of mobility was difficulties in validating and recognizing knowledge and skills gained abroad. In a brave attempt

to solve the problem European Community launched in 1985 a completely new program: ERASMUS. The Community was to provide financial support for student mobility. The program was described as:

- (i.) enabling a growing number of students (at least 10% by 1992) to acquire first hand experience of life in another Member State through a recognised period of study abroad
- (ii.) ensuring the development of a pool of graduates with direct experience of intra-Community cooperation, as a means of providing a broader basis for intensified economic and social cooperation in the Community
- (iii.) strengthening ties between citizens of the various Member States, with a view to consolidating the concept of a People's Europe [Haig 1970, p. 130; *A general system*, pp. 6-8]

The result of adopting ERASMUS program was reaching further than just creating understandable system of educational credentials. The program was to stimulate mutual understanding among European students and such acquired understanding should have led to more general, European perception of challenges that member states and their citizens faced. The Program should have been a convenient tool in rebuilding common cultural tradition [Field 2001, pp. 8-9]. So far, more than 3 million students participated in the program that enabled them to spend at least three months at the institution of higher education in other country. "ERASMUS experience" became even a studied cultural phenomenon [Feyen and Krzaklewska]. The program has started to educate new generation of European youth that are aware of the "European dimension" not only of education, but politics, economy, and culture. Thus the powerful institution, European Union, invested money in higher education to gain soft skills of grantees. The Europeanization has eventually started to mean not a common vision for institutional organization and governance but more general understanding of Europe.

FACING THE FUTURE

The economic crisis that struck Europe forced some budget cuts. The ERASMUS program was one of the programs that suffered, as it was explained by many officials: it became a victim of its own success. So

many students travelled abroad (230 000 during the academic year 2010-2011) that costs of the program became an important share of EU budget. The funding for the ERASMUS for the seven year period 2007-2013 was estimated to be ca. EUR 3,1 billion. In 2010 budget for ERASMUS actions amounted to EUR 435,03 million (and one should notice a steady growth of the expenditures [*The Erasmus Programme* 2012, p. 114]. In a moment of fiscal instability it was a common pattern to cut unnecessary spending, but the importance of the Program became so obvious that no one is even contemplating the termination of ERASMUS actions.

The interplay of the *Bologna Process* and European Union policies and activities shows yet another interesting characteristic of the Europeanization of higher education systems and higher education institutions across the continent. Although it is the European Union that has powerful institutions (sometimes even too powerful and bureaucratic) and can instate regulations that all the member states must adhere, it is the voluntary program started by the *Bologna Declaration* that accelerated the interdependencies among European colleges and universities. The quest for common recognition of knowledge and skills was understood by EU and as a result EU created European Qualification Framework as the means to easily compare the level of expertise graduates from various countries get [*From Leuven* 2009, pp. 3-4].

The integration of European universities reaches far beyond the European Union thanks to the achievements of the *Bologna Process*. The integration once started as the administrative means for facilitating mobility, helped policy-makers and the public to understand the importance of university experience in educating citizens caring for European diversity-unity mix. ERASMUS mobility program, with generous support of the European Union, has enabled a large cohort of students to experience 'Europeanness' of various higher education systems.

The Europeanization of universities should not be understood only as the political and organizational force that makes European institutions of higher education homogenous. Despite many discussions emphasizing socio-economic outcomes of university education, the *Bologna Process* and EU-sponsored ERASMUS program alike influence and stimulate cultural changes among the youth, bringing new understanding of 'Europeanness'. The Europeanization of

universities bridges gaps among European countries more in a cultural than economic sense.

There is still one important question, however. Global changes of higher education, further accelerated by international agreements such as World Trade Organization or General Agreement on Trade in Services (with higher education considered to be tradable educational service) make European actions obsolete to some extent. Students and faculty members are expected to travel outside the European Higher Education Area and Europe is expected to attract students and researchers from other regions of the world. The Europeanization of universities seems to be an important process that makes colleges and universities of our continent more attractive for incoming students and faculty members. Understandable system of quality assurance and qualification recognition, as the combined outcome of the *Bologna Process* and European Union activities, makes European higher education more and more desirable [Bassett 2006, pp. 36-37]. The Europeanization of higher education, as it is the case of other field, is not a mere result but a process that still should be carefully studied and sponsored.

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