Consolidation of the higher education area in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Launched at the Budapest-Vienna ministerial conference in March 2010, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is the next step in the achievement of the goals set out by the 1999 Bologna Declaration. Continuing the long European tradition of higher education cooperation, the Declaration, designed to promote harmonization of the intra-European educational “architecture” in addition to strengthening its worldwide degree of competitiveness and attractiveness, was an answer to common European problems. The authors suggest that the Area, and in particular its Central and Eastern European member states, are currently facing five major challenges, all of which have a political background: the excessively “à la carte” approach by some member countries to the implementation of the Bologna action lines; geographical “clusterization” of the Area; social and political barriers to academic mobility; restrained process ownership; and the insufficient visibility of the “Bologna label”.

Introduction

Nations that learn from other nations grow. Recognizing that in spite of their difference, European higher education systems are facing common internal and external challenges, related to the spread of new technologies, evolving labour market demands and rapid globalisation, 29 European countries adopted, in June 1999, the Bologna Declaration.1 The Bologna Process, named after the initial declaration and designed to bring down education borders, to create a zone of “mutual trust” and to establish a “more complete and far-reaching Europe, in particular building upon and strengthening its intellectual, cultural, social and scientific and technological dimensions”2, started explosively. Its first ten years were marked by a rapidly expanding number of participating countries and a constantly enlarging range of policy areas covered.

In March 2010, at the 10th anniversary of the Bologna Process, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched, considered to be the next step in the achievement of the goals set out by the 1999 Declaration. Embracing the objectives put forward by the Process, the EHEA is conceptualized as a vast reservoir of talent for the larger European economy and a vehicle of boosting attractiveness of Europe’s educational tradition.

The history of European cooperation in higher education does not start with the Bologna Process. The European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, better known as ERASMUS today, was introduced in 1987. In 1988 400 universities signed the Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum, which stipulated the importance of universities' independence and called for broader internationalization, then 1997 was marked by the adoption of the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region by the Council of Europe followed by the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration. This paved the way for the Bologna ministerial meeting the following year. However, as the latest Bologna with Student Eyes report underlines, these initiatives “never came close to reaching the same level of comprehensiveness as instigated by the Bologna Process”.3

“In terms of reaching across geography and languages, let alone in terms of turning ancient higher education systems on their heads, the Bologna Process has been the most far-reaching and ambitious reform of higher education ever undertaken,” summarised, in 2009, Clifford Adelman in his monograph designed to familiarize the US higher education system with the recent European developments.4


2 Ibid.

3 Bologna with Student Eyes 2012, ESU, April 2012

The scale of the EHEA project that, on the basis of voluntary cooperation, develops and implements common goals for the higher education systems of more than 40 countries is unparalleled. Another distinctive characteristic of the Bologna Process is its pan-European character. After a series of enlargements, the EHEA extends today to 47 countries, embracing, alongside the European Union, Russia, the Balkans and Turkey, parts of Central Asia and the Caucasus. What are the core goals of the Bologna Process, what makes it so “unprecedented”?

However, there is much more to be done. Summarizing the achievements of the first ten years of the Bologna Process, the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué indicates that “since not all the objectives have been completely achieved, the full and proper implementation of these objectives […] will require increased momentum and commitment beyond 2010”, while the 2010 Budapest-Vienna Declaration stresses that “the EHEA action lines such as degree and curriculum reform, quality assurance, recognition, mobility and the social dimension are implemented to varying degrees”. The same idea is reiterated in 2012 by the European Student Union, which underlines that “progress has not yet caught up with the expectations propagated by the commitments and targets set by ministers” and that developments since the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Conference have even been “deplorably sliding backwards on some of the key action lines”.

Alongside technical difficulties with implementation, the development of the EHEA, created and operating primarily as an intergovernmental initiative, has revealed a number of overarching political issues stalemating its future progress. In order to analyze them, it is necessary to briefly outline the core objectives of the European Higher Education Area and to follow on their development over the past twelve years. Then the major challenges, facing the Area today, would be analyzed. This includes: the “à la carte” approach to the implementation of Bologna action lines, clusterization of the Area, social and political barriers to academic mobility, lack of broader social engagement in the Process and low international visibility of the “Bologna label”. Finally, recommendations on how to change the status quo will be made.

5 Since 2009, the EHEA includes: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The FYR Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine and United Kingdom. URL: http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx


8 Bologna with Student Eyes 2012, ESU, April 2012
I. **Bologna Process: fourteen years of development**

The Bologna Process originates from the recognition that in spite of differences, European higher education systems are facing common internal and external challenges.

Firstly, since the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Europe has started to increasingly face the challenge of lagging behind other regions. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, a certain tendency of technological backlog of the European countries, compared to the developments in the USA and Japan, began to take shape. This tendency did not diminish over the years. As a result, Europe proved to be much slower than the USA to popularize the usage of plastic cards, to develop mobile communication and to introduce the Internet. Thus, by the beginning of the 1990s, developed European countries were overtaken, in terms of the mass usage of certain technological innovations, not only by the USA and Japan, but also by countries such as the Republic of South Africa, in which the system of cash dispensers, Internet payments for communal services through the national Beltel network and mobile communication became widely spread already by the beginning of the 1990s.

The second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century witnessed the contemporary society become increasingly knowledge-based, focusing, as D. Bell said, on “intellectual technologies”. Knowledge becomes a key component of economic and social development. The increasing role of knowledge-based economy has revealed a shortage of highly skilled European graduates in key areas and the lagging of educational services behind the market demands. While wider Internet access has simplified scientific communication, it has also enabled the spread of new types of educational programs, such as, for example, e-learning degrees, proposed by non-European higher education providers, making the competition for students’ hearts, minds and money genuinely global.

The beginning of the 1990s saw Europe’s historical leadership in the sphere of higher education steadily eroded. Both the USA and Australia start actively promoting their higher education services, which becomes an important part of their exports. In the early 1990s, the number of European students studying in the USA exceeded the number of American students studying in Europe.\footnote{Baidenko V. (ed.). *Bolonsky protsess: narastajushaya dinamika i mnogoobraziye: dokumenti mejdunarodnih forumov i mnenija zarubejnih expertov*, M.: RossiyskyNoviy Universitet, 2002.}

For Europe, higher education has always been an inalienable part of its cultural and historic traditions. “We must in particular look at the objective of increasing the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education. The vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal that its culture has for other countries,” states the 1999 Bologna Declaration.\footnote{The Bologna Declaration, 19 June 1999. URL: http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/about/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION1.pdf} Thus, concerns related to the lagging behind of European education
did not solely have an economic aspect. They were also sensitive psychologically and, above all, politically, as higher education today has an increasing impact on political developments, gradually becoming an instrument of “soft power”.11

Via the launching of the Bologna Process, Europe opted for greater harmonization of action, coordinated reforms and compatible higher education systems. This was seen as culturally, economically and politically beneficial in terms of contributing to the construction of a distinctive European educational brand, which would help increase Europe’s competitiveness on the global scale and create a pan-European community. The EHEA was conceptualized as a vast reservoir of talent for the larger European economy and a vehicle of boosting attractiveness of Europe’s educational tradition.

The goal presupposed a set of specific objectives, which were adjusted and enlarged during the six Ministerial conferences that followed the adoption of the Bologna Declaration. The Bologna action lines include: the implementation of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; the establishment and wider application of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS); promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance; the adoption of a three-cycle system (Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD); the development of a more individually tailored educational paths, popularising life-long learning and mobility promotion. Additionally, it also advocates for an increased engagement of higher education institutions and students in the EHEA policy developments and a greater international openness and attractiveness of the EHEA. The social dimension of higher education, designed to enable broader popular access to educative services, is also seen as one of the major action lines.

On the overall, higher education systems across the 47 EHEA countries look significantly different from how they were 13 years ago. Most structural elements of the Area, i.e. those involving legislation and national regulation, have been, at least partly, implemented. It should be also taken into consideration that some of the desired outcomes of the key objectives of compatibility, comparability and attractiveness require post-implementation time to bear sizeable fruit.

The scheme below provides an overview of the evolution of the core Bologna objectives between 1999 and the latest Ministerial conference that took place in Bucharest in April 2012.

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The Bologna Process: from Sorbonne to Bucharest, 1998-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mobility of students and teachers</th>
<th>Mobility of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff</th>
<th>Social dimension of mobility</th>
<th>Portability of loans and grants</th>
<th>Improvement of mobility data</th>
<th>Attention to visas and work permits</th>
<th>Challenges of visas and work permits, pension systems and recognition</th>
<th>Benchmark of 20% by 2020 for student mobility</th>
<th>Work towards full portability of national grants and loans</th>
<th>Develop degree and non-degree mobility</th>
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<tr>
<td>A common two-cycle degree system</td>
<td>Easily readable and comparable degrees</td>
<td>Fair recognition</td>
<td>Inclusion of doctoral level as third cycle</td>
<td>OF-EHEA adopted National Qualifications Frameworks by 2010</td>
<td>National Qualifications Frameworks (QF) by 2012</td>
<td>Redouble efforts to finalise implementation of the national QFs</td>
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<td>Social dimension</td>
<td>Equal access</td>
<td>Reinforcement of the social dimension</td>
<td>Commitment to produce national action plans with effective monitoring</td>
<td>National targets for the social dimension to be measured by 2020</td>
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<td>Lifelong learning (LLL)</td>
<td>Alignment of national LLL policies Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)</td>
<td>Flexible learning paths in higher education</td>
<td>Role of higher education in LLL Partnerships to improve employability</td>
<td>LLL as a public responsibility requiring strong partnerships Call to work on employability</td>
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<td>Use of credits</td>
<td>A system of credits (ECTS)</td>
<td>ECTS for credit accumulation</td>
<td>Need for coherent use of tools and recognition practices</td>
<td>Continuing implementation of Bologna tools</td>
<td>Insure ECTS/Diploma Supplement are based on learning outcomes</td>
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<td>European cooperation in quality assurance</td>
<td>Cooperation between quality assurance and recognition professionals</td>
<td>Quality assurance at institutional, national and European level</td>
<td>European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance adopted</td>
<td>Creation of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)</td>
<td>Quality as an overarching focus for EHEA Allow EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies to operate across the EHEA</td>
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<td>Europe of Knowledge</td>
<td>European dimensions in higher education</td>
<td>Attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area</td>
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<td>International cooperation on the basis of values and sustainable development</td>
<td>Strategy to improve the global dimension of the Bologna Process adopted</td>
<td>Enhance global policy dialogue through Bologna Policy Fora Encourage knowledge-based alliances in the EHEA</td>
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Although much has been already achieved during the first Bologna decade, shifting the landmark from Bologna 2010 to Bologna 2020, the Budapest Vienna Declaration acknowledged that success in reform implementation has varied from country to country with almost every country having a list of unchecked to-do projects. In its second decade, the core issue for the Bologna

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Process would be to further deepen its core objectives and to implement the targets, set during the first decade, more effectively. From the political perspective, what are these challenges?

**EHEA: five challenges to counter**

In an article on the development of the Bologna Process in Russia, Voldemar Tomusk underlines that «Pizza Bolognese à la Russe is a complex piece of culinary art. As we have argued elsewhere (Tomusk 2004) the Bologna Process is being driven by three relatively independent forces: the cultural, political and economic agendas. In Russia, as in many other places, there is consequently more than one chef in the kitchen ». As will be shown below, all challenges faced by the EHEA are multi-dimensional, with roots deeply interconnected in a variety of social spheres. Consequently, speaking about the political dimension of the Bologna Process development, the related economic, cultural and historical aspects will be mentioned.

**The « à la carte » approach**

The speed of geographical enlargement of the Bologna Process is exceptional. Eighteen new countries joined the Bologna Process in less than ten years, raising its membership to 47 by 2009. Moreover, additional 23 countries from all over the world participate in the Process with observer status, which increases the total number to 70. The interest towards the Area continues to grow, with the 2012 Bologna Policy Forum welcoming approximately 40 delegations of non-EHEA countries alongside its 47 member states. New membership requests are also being filed, the latest one made by Belarus.

Such eagerness to join can be explained, partially, by the nature of the EHEA. Both the Bologna Process and the Area were conceived as a non-binding framework, a community of practice in which reform implementation is a responsibility of an individual country. Reforms are implemented individually by the members that take into account their national contexts.

On the overall, the “à la carte” approach has proven its efficiency. First, no other mechanism would have enabled the Area to engage such a number of countries over a short period of time in the common endeavour of the higher education reform. Secondly, even those member states that have opted for minimal engagement in the Process, are subjected to its influence, which stimulates, even if to a small extent, the reform of their higher education systems. In addition, had the EHEA embarked on, standardizing rather than harmonizing the national education systems of its member states, the divergences between these systems would have only

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14 Bologna Secretariat Newsletter, December 2012
aggravated. Finally, the Bologna Process may create a field for broader interstate cooperation such as it is in the case of Russia and Latvia, both of which participate in the Bologna process and have a history of close educational cooperation in the second half of the 20th century. Over a long period of time Latvia and Russia had a common system of higher education, which enabled mutual recognition of diplomas and created a common basis for training scientific and teaching personnel. Russian was the main language of the educational process, and the systems shared many other traits in common.

Not all EHEA members started from a similar baseline, as some already had certain elements of their higher education systems similar to those required by Bologna which made the adjustment process easier. This is, the credit transfer systems existed in a number of countries, such as Sweden, Finland, Spain and Scotland before Bologna, even if based on different units of analysis. Similarly, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was broadly used in the 1990s by countries participating in the Erasmus programme.

Consequently, larger countries, such as Russia with its 9,9 million students (academic year 2008/2009)15 and with a significant number of higher education institutions, found the reform process more challenging due to the seize, geographical spread and “not adjusted” (as in the aforementioned countries) education systems.

In addition, the speed of reform implementation is also partly correlated with the specific objectives, pursued by countries while adhering to the Bologna Process, which vary significantly among the member states. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia considered the Bologna Process as a means to pursue their “Europeanization”, and as a step towards their future EU and NATO integration.16 On the other hand, the personal position of the then Minister of Education Vladimir Filippov seems to have played an important role in Russia’s decision to adhere to the Bologna Process.

However, although the collective and voluntary intergovernmental approach has worked well in defining the shared vision of the Process, some states, once they became members, seem to have lost political will to pursue the reforms. A divergence of views has emerged over the time among old and new member-states, with the front-runners pushing for new action lines, while the recent adherents opting for better implementation of the already identified topics. This creates the impression of an overall inefficiency of the Process.

Finally, some countries joined the process not to be left “outside of it”, without any clear goals in place and, likewise, any cost-benefit analysis conducted beforehand. When it came to concrete action, they consequently opted for the “à la carte approach”, remaining countries located within the EHEA rather than integrated into it.

The EHEA, which does not envisage any membership suspension mechanisms, can only encourage more engaged participation during informal contacts. Other tools, such as the “naming and shaming” tactic, which would benchmark the member states’ performance on a regular basis, could also be applied. A more radical solution is proposed by the European Student Union, which recommends the “revocation of the Bologna label” in cases of failure to meet the minimum Bologna standards by the participating states. The Bologna brand should be reserved only for the high-scoring members of the EHEA.17

**Bologna “South”/ Bologna “North”**

Mobility is one of the core goals of the Bologna Process, together with its importance underlined in numerous Bologna-related documents and in every Bologna Declaration. Bologna aims not only at increasing the attractiveness of the Area for students from non-EHEA countries, but also at boosting the level of student and staff circulation within the higher education area itself. The Leuven Communiqué set a concrete 20% target to be achieved by 2020.18

Notwithstanding the fact, hardly enough is done today for this ambitious agenda to succeed. The EHEA as a whole does not yet have attractive schemes for inclusive engagement of the integrity of its members. First of all, an apparent misbalance remains in the East-West and South-North mobility flows. “The general tendency is towards East-West imbalances, with incoming students coming predominantly from Eastern and Southern Europe and outward students heading towards Western and Northern Europe,” summarises the 2012 Bologna Process Implementation report.19

Western European countries are the major recipients of foreign EHEA students, while Eastern Europe and Turkey – remain the Area’s main exporters. The Eurostat data shows that more than half of all incoming students from inside the EHEA choose the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Austria as their study destination. These countries accommodate between 52,000 and 130,000 EHEA area students yearly.20 At the same time, seven EHEA countries, mostly Central and Eastern European, accommodated less than one thousand EHEA students over the same period of time.

Interestingly, a certain core-periphery tendency has thus emerged, poignantly described by Tomusk as “the path of transforming its [European] higher education into an English-language-

17 *Bologna with Student Eyes* 2012, ESU, April 2012


operated knowledge shop with its high street in Cambridge and Oxford and night bazaars in Tallinn, Riga, Sofia and so on”.  

Another tendency is the clusterization of the Area with increased student mobility among small groups of the EHEA countries linked by common historical and language ties. Thus, French students continue enrolling into Belgian HEIs in which the selection procedure is more open, German graduates pursue their studies in the Netherlands while Albanians study in Greece. Azeri students most commonly opt for Russia and Turkey, with which the country has long cooperation traditions and bilateral agreements in the sphere (with Russia).

In the case of Russia, clusterization has a different dimension. With its huge territory and Eurasian positioning, Russia is facing a situation where the universities based in its European part are more integrated in the Bologna Process than those in Siberia and the Far East. The latter seek partnership with the universities in the United States and in other neighboring regions. A potential danger lies in the possible erosion of the single educational space in Russia with all its consequences. However, there is also a different scenario. Geographical diversity may become Russia’s considerable advantage, because sooner or later a need is bound to arise for some kind of a “converter” between European, American, and Asian educational standards. In this context, huge prospects are opening up for Russia, which could play a “mediating” role between different educational systems.

Apart from geographical clusterization, the clusterization of the Area’s universities can also pose a risk. The Bologna Process can bring about the restructuring of the entire university community, with at least three strata coming to the fore. The first strata will include the most successful and prestigious universities fully integrated into the Bologna Process. These universities will form some kind of consortiums for teaching pan-European elites. The second strata will be composed of universities that will be partly integrated into the Bologna Process. This category of universities will be assigned the role of educating those who will work at the local or sub-regional levels. Finally, the third group of universities will consist of “outsiders”, struggling to continue their activities and working mainly at the local level. The borderlines between the described strata will be transparent and highly malleable.

**Social and political barriers to academic mobility**

It is clear that the popularity of a certain study destination and students’ motivation to be mobile does not solely depend on the geographical location and reputation of the destination of study. Today’s major challenge is not only in boosting, but also in diversifying student mobility within the entire EHEA, which requires concentrated efforts to overcome such barriers as financial hardship, visa procedures and the risk of brain drain.

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Almost half of the EHEA member-States are not part of the Schengen zone. 40% of the EHEA students, most notably those coming from Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine and Turkey have reported facing visa barriers when attempting to study in another EHEA country. For the moment, not enough is being done to improve the status quo. For instance, recent British legislation, which introduced the points-based visa system for foreign students in March 2009, without differentiating between the EHEA and non-EHEA countries, has done little to live up to the goals declared. Similarly, although visa regime facilitation measures have been under implementation since 2006 in France, it is still classified as “strict”.

Neither have the non-Schengen countries done enough to facilitate the foreign student mobility. For example, a complicated visa procedure exists for foreign students who plan to undertake a study period in Russia, under which an HIV/AIDS test results are required to be submitted with an application form. It should nevertheless be mentioned that the Russian authorities, aware of the visa and other logistical problems faced by students planning a mobility period in Russia, have been paying increasing attention to resolving them. A number of measures are suggested in the “Concept for Exporting Educational Services of the Russian Federation”, adopted in 2011.22

Material resources put forward to facilitate inter-European mobility are not sufficient, either. Although important steps have been taken with the adoption in 1969 of the European Agreement on Continued Payment of Scholarships to Students Studying Abroad and its growing implementation by the EHEA governments, disparities still remain within the Area. This creates problems for less wealthy countries and citizens. Though a number of solutions have been proposed, including distinct university funding allocated to mobile students coming from less privileged background and inter-university and regional agreements, requiring the sending university to cover the travel costs and the receiving maintenance, such as in the case of the Central European Programme for University Studies, as well as special grants and loans for going abroad, allocated, as in Serbia and Russia, on a competitive basis, their number is too limited to encourage a full-scale mobility process. Today, mobility is only possible for those who can afford it.

Lastly, the risk of brain drain, mostly felt in Central and Eastern Europe, can have an extremely negative impact on the Process development. Taking up opportunities and enjoying freedom of choice is an inalienable individual right, but the consequences for the sending nation are to be taken into account when mobility programmes are designed. In Western Europe scholar and professor contracts in another EHEA country rarely lead to permanent migration, which can be partly explained by a relatively high geographic cohesiveness of the region and facilitated registration and social security procedures for all EU citizens. On the other hand, for a number of non-EU EHEA member states such mobility is associated with the risk of brain drain. Thus, around 20 000 scholars leave Russia yearly. Compared to the number of scholars migrating within the EU, this number seems insignificant. However, if in the latter the process is best

defined as temporary “migration”, in the case of most CEE countries, the definition to be used is “immigration”.  

In order for mobility programmes to succeed and to be greater endorsed and promoted in all the EHEA countries, the primary strategy remains the creation and development, through support and cooperation, of favourable and attractive conditions for students and scholars. This is, so they remain and return to their home institutions where their new capacities and knowledge are indispensable. In order to do so, a clear-cut line is to be drawn between academic (temporary) mobility and permanent migration, which should include both administrative measures such as stricter visa extension requirements and conditionality of scholarships. Thus, the Chevening Scholarship awarded by the British government to students aiming at pursuing their studies in the United Kingdom is conditioned on its receiver’s consent to return to his/her home country on completion of the studies. Brain circulation would benefit the entire EHEA significantly more than brain drain.

While higher levels of student mobility is a crucial factor in the creation of the “Europe of Knowledge”, the paradox of learning globally while teaching locally should be avoided. Greater attention is to be paid to the development of scholar and professor mobility within the EHEA, a goal already set in the Bologna Declaration which stipulates the increase of the mobility of teachers, researchers and administrative staff by improved recognition and valorisation of “periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, without prejudicing their statutory rights”. For the moment, too little is done to promote it, with the focus of attention seemingly shifting solely to student mobility promotion.

Internationalisation of scientific research and publications, conducted within one common program by several universities from the EHEA, can be one of the first viable steps in this direction.

Wider process ownership

The above-mentioned measures, required to enforce geographical consolidation and harmonisation within the EHEA, would be undermined if the actual stakeholders lack a common vision of the set out goals and necessary cohesion on the national level. It is important to ensure that the ownership of the Process rests with its stakeholders. An intergovernmental framework is an effective tool for a rapid decision-making and reform promotion, but the success of the actual implementation lies with its endorsement by national parliaments, higher education institutions and student associations.

23 Chepurina M., “Mejdunarodno-polititcheskie problemi v razvitii obsheevropejskogo obrazovatelnogo prostranstva”, Vestnik MGIMO (U), №2(23), 2012

A university, in accordance with the Sorbonne Declaration, is the basic structural unit of the Bologna process. For the Bologna Process to succeed, universities, academic community and students should be involved as equal partners and involved at every level of decision making, which would lead to the reform process being considered not as an imposition but rather as a two-way cooperation. A new relationship based on strong partnership between public authorities and the stakeholders is a means of proceeding in the right direction and of comprehensively reforming the national higher education systems. As an inherent part of change management, it seems to be a necessity to persuade, educate and prepare students, scholars and academic staff for coupling with the changes, benefits and/or temporary drawbacks, caused by the Process.

**Boosting international attractiveness of the “Bologna brand”**

Alongside the reform and harmonization of the intra-European higher education systems, developing the external dimension of the Bologna Process has, right from the outset, been a major aim. The considerations regarding the links between the European higher education and the rest of the world can be already found in the *Magna Charta Universitatum* and the Sorbonne Declaration. Reiterating them, the Bologna Declaration sets itself an objective of ensuring that “the European higher education system acquires a world-wide degree of attraction”. The EHEA operates in a global, continuously internationalising environment, which creates additional opportunities as well as challenges.

The distinctiveness of the policy objectives set by the EHEA consists in its major focus on global cooperation rather than competition, or, as Clifford Adelman puts it, the EHEA’s “smart money is cooperation and conversation”. Although the EHEA member-States cannot neglect the challenge posed by other higher education institutions and systems worldwide, it was nevertheless decided that worldwide attractiveness of the Area can only be achieved through cooperative partnership measures, via, as stipulated by the Bergen Communiqué, the “sharing experiences of reform processes with neighboring regions”.

This cooperative orientation of the Process creates a favourable environment for its worldwide promotion. However, this potential tool of soft power remains to be put into practice, as only few institutions and people outside a closed circle of higher education experts and policy-makers are fully aware of the actual substance behind the Bologna label. The importance of improving the information on the EHEA and on the possibilities it provides is an issue.

Although a website devoted to the EHEA has been launched, too little is done by the European higher education systems themselves to enforce the legal “personality” of the Process, with most countries preferring to promote their own higher education systems internationally rather than

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the entire EHEA. Expert remarks reveal that most students still choose to study in a particular country, most generally in the UK, France or Germany, rather than in the EHEA as a whole. Nevertheless, it seems that this situation is likely to change in the future, with an increasing number of higher education institutions throughout the EHEA proposing programmes in English and creating financially favourable conditions for non-EHEA students to enrol in their programmes. Inter-EHEA Joint Degrees and mobility programs between less and more renowned institutions can help attract students even to traditionally less popular destinations, provided that they offer good-quality services for moderate prices.

Such cooperation, based on close communication and good practice sharing, proves advantageous not only for the countries directly engaged, but for the entire Area itself, promoting better understanding of its values and potential.

**Conclusion**

Since the launching of the Bologna Process in 1999, Bologna has become an institution in a more socio-political sense, acquiring value and legitimacy beyond the performance of concrete tasks. It reflects a policy vision which has been able to unify political goals of governments and frame the strategies of higher education actors of the larger European community. In policy-making terms, it has also been a mechanism of developing policies and testing cooperation modes within the larger pan-European community, taking place on equal, benevolent terms.

Over time, the EHEA goals were enlarged and new objectives were set. Today, some of the action lines are almost completed and all countries have made considerable progress in certain domains. The participation of both EU and non-EU Central and Eastern European countries in the Process has not only contributed to the development of the common European educational space, but also to the development of Europe as a whole.

Today’s goal is to overcome the major challenges facing the Area, in particular, its clusterization which leaves the CEE countries, notwithstanding their solid educational potential, on the periphery of the Process, and to ensure that the governmental commitment remains enduring and sincere, enabling all EHEA member-States, notwithstanding the length of their membership period and their geographical location, to succeed in attaining the established objectives. History has shown that “how well” is often more important than “how much”.

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