

### Abstract

The paper deals with the introduction of the Bologna action lines in Europe, as well as in Georgia. It identifies major achievements, challenges and drawbacks. The topic is approached from local and international perspectives. It unfolds the political decisions, legislative initiatives, administrative changes and international participation with respect to Bologna reforms.

In addition the paper tries to pinpoint the existing problems and suggests recommendations elaborated during the official Bologna seminars. Besides, the author tries to answer the following questions –*How do we perceive the European Higher Education Area (EHEA; what are perspectives, opportunities and threats beyond 2010?*

**Key Words:** Political Decisions; Legislative Initiatives; Administrative Changes; International Participation; Bologna Reforms in Georgia.

### 1. Bologna Process

In 1998 when the education ministers of four European countries gathered in Paris at Sorbonne University to adopt the Joint Declaration on Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System they would have hardly imagined that the process would involve more than 45 countries in less than a decade.

The Bologna Process entailed unprecedented changes in the national higher education systems and strategies. Countries committed themselves to fully restructure their education systems in line with the ten action lines identified in the three consecutive ministerial conferences of the Bologna process.

These changes involve not only structural reforms but also different approaches in governance, teaching, learning and research:

- ✓ Changes in governance imply autonomous and accountable universities, academic freedom in teaching and research, participatory governance, result-oriented and diversified resources;
- ✓ Changes in teaching imply shift from teacher-centered education to student-oriented learning, focus on learning outcomes and professional development throughout life;
- ✓ Changes in learning imply the concept of "learning to learn" implying that nowadays it is more important to know how to search, analyze, and synthesize information rather than to remember isolated pieces of information without practical value attached to it and finally;
- ✓ Changes in research imply attaching market value to research through innovation and commercialization of research results.

Even though some countries enjoy more favorable conditions for introducing these changes in terms of historical background or access to resources, still all the Bologna member countries admit that they had to overcome various obstacles or severe resistance from different stakeholders while introducing these changes.

Along the same line, we may put a question to ourselves, *why would we want to fully reshape our higher education systems disregarding our long-standing history or traditions; Why is the Bologna Process so attractive for all nations in Europe or beyond its borders; what made us decide that we should adjust our national policy and strategy to the common approach elaborated*

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*in the Bologna Process*. The answer is simple. We all admit that our strength lies in our unity, and we are the first who suffer from the dividing lines and widening gaps in our perception and policies. Besides, the main asset of the Bologna Process is that it does not intend to create a uniform European Higher Education System, but an area where diverse systems coexist but at the same time provide opportunities for enhanced cooperation, mobility and employability.

In the era of knowledge-based society and economy we all realize that knowledge; skills and competences embodied in individuals have a market value and may bring benefit both to individuals as well as to society at large. Besides, the shared values in our educational policies are the major prerequisites for international cooperation, increased mobility and mutual recognition based on trust and confidence. These principal goals and values attract so many nations and institutions in the Bologna Process.

By becoming the member of the Bologna Process we commit ourselves to build a European Higher Education Area where our countries and citizens will enjoy all the possible benefits of this common policy. Thus the Bologna Process creates a unique opportunity for ministers, academics, students, employers and all other stakeholders of 46 countries to sit around the same table and negotiate on overcoming the existing challenging and problems.

## **2. EHEA**

We all look forward to 2010, when we will finally reap the results of the challenging years of transformation. We can identify some of the items that best depict the EHEA:

- ! Shift from teacher-oriented or input-oriented higher education to student-oriented and output-oriented one;
- ! Ensuring employability of graduates through development of generic and subject-specific knowledge, skills and competences based on the research results;
- ! Increased public expenditures, information technology, teachers' development, modern textbooks, refurbished buildings etc.
- ! Ensuring right of learners to get relevant education anywhere in the EHEA, to have a freedom of choice, and the right to be judged based on performance and merits, not definitely by wealth or social status;
- ! Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in policy-making, strategic planning as well as in decision-making;
- ! Increased student interest and inclusion in scientific activities through relevant curricula, innovation and commercialization of scientific results etc.;

What more needs to be done to realize the EHEA by 2010.

- ! Translating action lines into concrete actions basically in three areas, such as Management, Teaching, and Resources;
- ! The main objective that we have to attain by this time is to update our university curricula to meet the contemporary demands of local and international labour market;
- ! Political determination and stability are very important factors contributing to the changes;
- ! Public expectations are high, however one needs to be cautious here, because public expectations often are like double-edged sword;
- ! Learning from each other, sharing the experience and good practice is essential in the process etc.

It is noteworthy that even if we achieve all these goals by 2010, it is quite possible that due to sweeping changes in all spheres of development we will have absolutely new challenges or problems to overcome beyond 2010. Therefore, it has already been admitted in the Bologna process

that we can not attain all the objectives by 2010; rather it will be the beginning of the new phase of cooperation with stronger basis and longer experience.

### **3. Georgia in the Bologna Process**

In Georgia, joining the Bologna process was like the genesis of a new era in our higher education reforms. We joined the process at a later stage, with reduced resources and deteriorating academic values, but with a clear goal to transform the input-oriented, corrupt, authoritarian, non-accountable, non-responsive, centralized, incompatible system to a knowledge-based, output-oriented and learner-centred system. To achieve these goals we committed ourselves to dramatically increase the public expenditures on education by 2010. Also a number of radical legislative, institutional and administrative changes were implemented:

- (i) A new law on higher education was adopted that envisage all the action lines of the Bologna Process;
- (ii) Accreditation system was established and National Education Accreditation Centre established;
- (iii) Student-centred and grant-based financing, called “money follows student” model was introduced;
- (iv) Unified National Admission Exams was held by National Assessment and Examination Centre;
- (v) Research grants were allocated on the competitive basis by the Georgian National Science Foundation;
- (vi) Student loan system was introduced in cooperation with the private banks of Georgia;
- (vii) A law on professional education was adopted that envisage separation of vocational and higher professional education, introduction of national qualifications framework and recognition of prior learning paths;
- (viii) Georgia was elected as a member of BFUG Board and involved in the work of London Communiqué Drafting Group etc.

One of the priorities for Georgia at present is to increase the attractiveness of the Georgian higher education system through strengthening the European dimension in quality, content and outcomes. Curriculum development, training of academic and administrative staff, elaboration of textbooks, strengthening partnership with business sector, involving employers and professional associations, increasing research potential at HEIs, attracting international students and foreign experts for peer review as well as introducing joint degrees are some of the main objectives for Georgian higher education community and the necessary preconditions for full integration in the European Higher Education Area.

### **4. Conclusion**

In the Bologna Process HE stakeholders face the challenge of making a clear distinction between the trends that seem incompatible but at the same time may not be separated from each other: these provisional dichotomies are (i) cooperation and competitiveness; (ii) university autonomy and accountability, (iii) education as public good as well as a private commodity, (iv) massification of education through maintaining the quality improvement culture. In order to strike a clear balance between these concepts, it is essential to stimulate a policy forum involving all HE stakeholders and adopt the good practices existing internationally.

In Georgia, having already introduced the strategic, legal and institutional changes, presently it has become imperative to shift the weight of reforms from national to institutional level, where the main actors will not be the policy-makers but the academia, learners and the employers themselves.