

INTERFACES OF LIFELONG LEARNING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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Summary: In the past decade, the notion of 'lifelong learning' has become an indispensable notion in higher education too; a fact predominantly resulting from the transformation of the socio-economic environment of education and its dynamic changes, and also from the change occurring in the relationship between this environment and the world of education. The findings of economic surveys carried out in recent years, decades have proven the existence of the interactive relationship between the quality of education and the growth rate of economy. Higher education forms a vital part of economy and society, and through its interconnections, the research and cognition of learning from each other may provide further opportunities of learning. Lifelong learning is an inseparable part of the Bologna Process in every respect, which is equally facilitated by the improvement of acknowledgement of previous knowledge, by the creation of more flexible learning routes, and last but not least by the extension of access to higher education. The success and its measure in gaining access into the circle of the international higher educational institutions will be a great challenge for the Hungarian institutions of higher education. The aspect of assuring equal opportunity and equity must be stressed steadily by the domestic socio-economic changes. In the interest of the further expansion of lifelong learning, it is of great importance that the access to higher education should be extended, and also the educational attitudes should be changed.

Keywords: reform of higher education, lifelong learning, the Bologna Process, two-cycle system, knowledge-based society

1. INTRODUCTION

These days knowledge is considered the most valuable factor providing competitive advantage and improvement. Urged by the European Council in June 2000, the member states of the EU were asked to take practical measures, namely to facilitate 'lifelong learning', which means the corner stone in the strategy which was intended to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world. Regarding the highest educational level, the institutions of higher education must provide the opportunities for the improvement of knowledge and abilities. It has been well known since 2001 that lifelong learning is one of the most important elements of the European Higher Education Area, it is an inseparable part of the Bologna Process in every respect. In my study, my intention is to demonstrate the interconnections of education and training with the labour market and its challenges; the conceptual background of lifelong learning will also be covered, and it will be presented how the approach to 'lifelong learning' has become a directing principle in the territory of European higher education.

1.1 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIFELONG LEARNING AND HIGHER EDUCATION, CONNECTING POINTS WITH THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

The educational structure can properly adopt the labour demand only if it adapts flexibly to the requirements of the labour market. It is becoming necessary to introduce a new type of system of education and training, in which the conventional school system is able to ensure

the conveyance of the ever-changing and improving knowledge base more effectively than ever. This must be supplemented with the preparation for 'lifelong learning'. According to the educational conception of the European Union, considerable amount of attention should be paid – beside the conventional institutional system – to the establishment of the institutional network of higher education and adult training, which, being adjusted to labour market demands, supports the citizens in finding the most appropriate training forms matching their individual goals. (Nagy, 2005)

Although the conception of 'lifelong learning' already appeared in Europe about 50 years ago, the ambition to harmonize it consciously has been observed since 1990s. (Derényi, 2007) Lifelong learning had become one of the directing principles of the European higher education in this manner, as it becomes obvious from the Sorbonne Declaration ratified in 1998, which called upon the establishment of the open European Higher Education Area. The publication of the Declaration was followed by wide publicity (based on Hrubos study); its further development was the launch of the Bologna Process from June 1999. The issue of higher education has received a highlighted role in the European integration process, right from the start.

Primarily, it is not intended in my study to provide a historical review, nor to describe various university models, however, it can be stated that the major points of relevance are appropriate. Based on her study dealing with the idea of the European Higher Education Area, Ildikó Hrubos Dr. distinguishes three models of higher education. Firstly, the British model, whose tradition-preserving role is emphasised mostly. The universities here are corporative organisations, subsidised mainly by either church or secular resources, not by governmental ones. The second is the continental European model, in which the government has a definitive role in financing and controlling its content. The third model is the American model, in which the university has the task to convey socially and economically useful information and knowledge, and to carry out research. (Hrubos, 2006)

I highlighted the issue of financing primarily because at the beginning of this year there was a stir-up as it became public to what extent the Hungarian government is willing to subsidise the full-time participants of higher education from the next term.

As a reaction, it can be said that the role of governments in subsidising and founding institutions of higher education already became firm in the 1970s. Since then a considerable expansion in higher education has been observed, the most spectacular manifestation of which was the increase of student figures. On the other hand, it also produced a negative effect, that is, diplomas were primarily attributed 'only' symbolic value. It was completed by the idea, according to which there would be a need for mainly less time-consuming and more practice-oriented trainings, which are adjusted, to the demands of the labour market. This is how the idea of 'lifelong learning' came to the surface, since it is going to be acceptable after a while that the individuals will change profession or career more times during their lives, therefore they will be compelled to participate in new training programmes.

Examining the crowding phenomenon from the economic point of view, it is obvious that the individual will make a reasonable choice of going on to higher education as long as it results in gaining higher income than it would happen with a qualification of lower level. Furthermore, it can also be stated, coming back to the recent events in Hungary, that the fact of the proper adaptation to the labour market is not so definitive by varying the frame numbers.

I highlighted the issue of financing in the first place because at the beginning of this year there was a stir-up as it became public that the Hungarian government reduced the government subsidised frame numbers of the higher education in January 2012. The main reason for that

was explained with the preference for training programmes in engineering, informatics and science in the adaptation to the labour market.

2. THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

2.1 NAME OF THE PROCESS

As mentioned in the 'Introduction' section, my aim is to give a short review of the Bologna Process as, in my opinion, it is the most worthy possibility of reflection to the circle of various issues. The Bologna Process was named after The Bologna Declaration, which was ratified by the ministers of education from twenty-nine European countries on 19 June, 1999.

This declaration is the voluntary political covenant of the ratifiers, according to which they are willing to standardize their systems of higher education, they will make them comparable and permeable, and furthermore they will establish the European Higher Education Area.

At the very start, the importance of the Bologna Process was seen in the foundation of the European Higher Education Area, which provides wide access to higher education functioning by the democratic principle and the freedom of science, prepares the students for the entrance to the labour market, and last but not least encourages mobility for the participants of higher education.

Today, 46 European countries participate in the Bologna Process. All of them are signatories of the European Cultural Convention, and devoted to the objectives of the European Higher Education Area. The Bologna Process was launched by a non-binding European-level agreement (the Bologna Declaration, 1999); as a result, significant institutional and system reforms of higher education were initiated all over Europe. Within the frames of the Bologna Process, work is going on in socially more considerable areas such as higher education, research and development, innovational relationships, equitable participation in higher education and lifelong learning.

2.2 ESSENCE OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

The essence of the Process lies in the fact that at its start, very different European structures of higher education were to be brought together and harmonised with the international standards. The main features of the new system were summarized as follows:

- The establishment of a transparent structure of three comparable degrees in the higher education system: Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, and PhD;
- The completion period of the Bachelor's degree training will not be shorter than three years, undergraduate students will receive a college degree;
- In quality management, supporting the development of a Europe-wide cooperation based on standardized criteria and methods, supporting higher education with its required European relevance;
- The establishment of a credit system, which encourages mobility among students and may be used in various other systems such as in that of lifelong learning.

Under these conditions the system would be in harmony with the European conventions and demands, with being attractive for students; the competitiveness and marketability of the educational system as well as those of the graduates would be firm in the labour market, on national, European and global levels.

2.3 STRUCTURE OF TRAINING

The description of the training structure is of great importance, since there are some questions to be formulated in terms of it. The Bologna Process has focused on the simple, practice-oriented training structure. According to the Hrubos study, training is realised through two basic models. One of them is the combination of the conventional university level of education and the newly established non-university training. As these two sectors are differently structured regarding the curriculum, the institutionalised transition was not possible. Beside this model, the article introduces the term of the linear model, where the students may participate in various programmes founded on each other. On the lower level of training, the training schemes are both theoretical and practical. This dual nature comes from the idea of giving the students the freedom to choose from two alternatives, namely, either to go on to a level of higher education or enter the labour market. (Hrubos, 2000)

However, what is worth mentioning about the realisation of the process considering the training structure is that various solutions of the multi-cycled training were born in different European countries and in various professional fields. At first sight, it appears conspicuously in the completion periods of trainings. The most common training structure is the 3+2 but the 4+2, 4+1.5, 4+1 or 3+1.5 structures have also appeared. (Hrubos, 2010) More details on the 3+2 training structure will be described below.

First of all, it must be pointed out that the implementation of the training structure was basically carried out within legislative frames. The training register defining the training schemes was also created, the aim of which was the reduction and simplification of the number of faculties of the earlier dual structure. Moreover, the system of conditions and process of establishing and launching training schemes were also regulated.

I would like to present the progression of training in the case of the 3+2 years scheme. It should be remarked here that there is still one more number 3 added to the structure. The first degree is the Bachelor's degree (BA/BSc), which means the first three years in higher education. The participant receives general theoretical and practical knowledge, and a further objective is to provide students with useful knowledge, which they can use after the transition to the labour market.

Then comes the second cycle of the training, labelled 'Master's degree' (MA/MSc), which may be entered after the successful graduation from the at least three-year first cycle. Graduation from the Master's degree means receiving a university diploma. According to the original plans, this is going to be 'the European degree', which should be harmonized in the European Higher Education Area, in particular the mutual, smooth acknowledgment of diplomas.

Finally, the PhD training may be considered to be the highest level of education, which means a full-time training of generally three years of completion. The ministers added it to the Bologna Process as the third cycle in 2003 when an agreement was reached that the most important element of PhD training is the extension of knowledge through original research, furthermore, that the PhD programmes may be able to facilitate the improvement of transferable knowledge and skills in accordance with the broader labour market demands.

During the problem diagnosis, questions arise about the reason for existence of the university ground degree in Hungary. From another aspect, in other words, why is there a demand for a qualification, which does not provide real qualification? The primary goal at the foundation of the training structure was to produce a group of graduates after a relatively short training duration, which may appear in the labour market with competitive knowledge.

In my opinion, problems have always appeared when a new training form was implemented in a certain field while the former was still functioning. Considering the Hungarian characteristic features, it can be pointed out that before the implementation of the Bologna Process; there had been two training cycles present. One of them was a system of short-term, profession-oriented advanced trainings, the other was the PhD programme based on the training scheme. Adding the college and university training to this, I find that the replacement of the conventional dual system (college and university training) with the Bachelor's and Master's degree trainings proved to be a great challenge. At the same time, the realisation of the domestic frame system – as revealed by the above-mentioned 2006 Follow-up Project (Temesi, 2006) – cannot be considered meritorious.

In connection with the previous point, a critical point in the clash of the old and new training systems is the run-out of the conventional trainings. This issue must still be dealt with in the present as there are numerous students remaining even until today, due to the credit system built out in the conventional training structure. I can assert it on the base of my experience, facing this phenomenon myself as a teacher. What is more, serious problems emerge during certain exam-periods partly owing to the fact that these students remaining from the conventional system studied a given subject so long ago that neither do they remember the requirements nor the material in the curriculum. Examining this issue from the aspect of the training institutions, they are compelled to maintain the subject offer of the conventional faculties even for years in order to ensure the opportunity for the lagging students to fulfil the training requirements. The simultaneous management of the various subjects of the two different training systems produces considerable additional costs for the institutions.

Finally, the appearance of the factor of uncertainty can also be considered negative. It appears on the side of students, teachers, parents and even the labour market. What is meant here is that it is present in the life of institutions until the end of establishment of the complete training structure. This factor becomes essential when it comes to the solutions, which may differ, from the optimal during the planning, processing and implementation of training schemes.

2.4 COMMON DEGREE CERTIFICATES

The Bologna Process made way for the cooperative, trans-border educational programmes of the latest type. The qualifications defined as 'common certificate' are generally characterised by the following crucial features:

- Programmes providing 'common certificate' are elaborated and approved co-operatively by several institutions;
- Students spend considerable periods at the partner institutions as exchange students;
- Terms and successful exams by the partner institutions are accepted fully and automatically by all of the participating institutions.

The above-mentioned features are general, it is clearly and accurately defined what the basic points of common certificates should be but, unfortunately, these issues appear in different forms in reality. Obviously, the uniform management of the training schemes launched by universities and colleges generates basic problems. The European harmonisation of the trainings may be realised in the opportunity of obtaining numerous stages of degrees, by means of which it will be possible to interrupt and continue the studies, and to ensure mobility among the institutions of higher education. Unfortunately, its realisation in practice has taken place differently, what is more, owing to the various implementation processes of the

countries during the change of the educational structure in the European Higher Education Area, there are significant obstacles in reconciling the trainings.

2.5 THE ISSUE OF MOBILITY

The European Higher Education Area was established with the primary goal of contribution to the mobility, in this respect, a considerable advancement can be observed. It may as well be declared that one of the success fields of the Bologna Process is the realisation of the mobility of students and even teachers, which also gained ground with good results in Hungary. The number of students and teachers leaving Hungarian institutions for foreign ones is increasing annually, and this proves to be true vice versa, since plenty of students and teachers are arriving in Hungary from abroad. Apart from the positive effects of mobility, there are still some problems to be overcome in this area. The critical issue of mobility in the European Higher Education Area is the direction of student migration, resulting in the lack of balance in the target areas. This lack of balance may still be observed in the input and output number of the participants, by analysing this factor it continues to show the differences between the standards of living, moreover, diplomatic and bureaucratic obstacles also tend to appear (e.g. Hungary's accession to the Schengen Agreement)

2.6 EMPLOYMENT AS THE MAIN ASPECT

The aspect of employment has been focused on in the establishment of the cyclic training system since the very beginning. In terms of the Bologna Process, employment means the ability of obtaining the first workplace, keeping occupied and that of the mobility in the labour market. Employment has been one of the main objectives of the Bologna Process since it was launched. Each cycle of higher education is expected to provide a qualification which is efficient and profitable in the labour market. Problems have also emerged regarding this matter, namely, the process of change was distorted by local interests, implying that certain institutions did not pay due attention to the didactic differences during the separation of the Bachelor's and Master's degrees.

3. CONCLUSION

Higher education has seen several reforms since the early 1960s. The European Higher Education Area while being established and developed is gradually starting to draw increasing interest in other parts of the world, as being highlighted in conferences of the European and international partners regarding the specialised political issues. The success and its measure in gaining access into the circle of the international higher educational institutions will be a great challenge for the Hungarian institutions of higher education.

The aspect of assuring equal opportunity and equity must be stressed steadily by the Hungarian domestic socio-economic changes. In the interest of the further expansion of lifelong learning it is of great importance that the access to higher education should be extended, and also, the educational attitudes should be changed. The restructuring of the accreditation culture and the establishment of permeability among the institutions will have considerable functions in the process; in addition, the mutual and bureaucratically smooth acknowledgment of the certificates will be an important measure. Furthermore, the assessment of tuition work and capacity will be crucial along with the restructuring of the current job culture, which may obviously take significant time. While shaping the higher educational policy, the real involvement of the participants and the coordination of the individual and institutional goals must be highly emphasised.

The natural consequence of the wide expansion of lifelong learning is that career planning is becoming general. The young individuals entering the school-system and the working adults plan their career, in which education has a highlighted role, a place and time planned in advance. The institutions of higher education are expected to adapt to this with their supply of training schemes. Each student in higher education should be offered a training route at the university, which is clearly adjustable to his or her individual career; already in the period of obtaining the first degree.

Not only is it urged by the increasing expenditure of the higher education with a resource gap and the tightened governmental subsidies, but also by the frequently mentioned prestige and respect, that is, the universities should have the right and responsibility for the professional training of their former students within their grasp. The credit system offers a good and quick opportunity to realise this task in Hungary as well, which may found the basis for the domestic and international further improvement of higher education faculties.

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