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# CHANGES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AT BELGRADE UNIVERSITY IN LIGHT OF THE ADOPTION OF THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION

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ALEKSANDRA TRKLJA

## INTRODUCTION

A very important and equally current phenomenon today in the whole European region, the Bologna Declaration, as one of the major bearers of higher education reform represents the subject of interest in this work. To be more exact, in this work we shall focus on the implementation of the Declaration at one of the Belgrade Universities in Serbia. For the sake of a precise and clear examination of this occurrence, we decided to consider one Faculty. This is the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade<sup>1</sup> where the target group represents the students of the first year of graphics, painting and sculpture<sup>2</sup>. The research questionnaire, which I carried out in June of this year in the form of an inquiry, has three sheets consisting of thirty questions and involves twenty students from the three above mentioned groups, ten of each sex. Although the initial idea was that the research should take into account as many students as possible, favourably a full tally of fifty students, most students, thirty of them totally refused to talk about the Bologna Declaration at all. Such a reaction is most interesting and as will be shown in the work later on harmonious with the answers given from the other twenty students who accepted to participate in the research.

In order to meet present editing constraints and because of the extent of the work, I have chosen to examine the students only, leaving out the administrative staff and professors in order not to widen my research. Because of this and being aware of the imperfection of this text, I will focus only on the thoughts and reactions of the students.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bologna Declaration came into operation in 2006 at the Faculty of Fine Arts.

<sup>2</sup> This work refers only to the first year students because the Bologna Declaration, at least for now, only involves the first year on this Faculty.

The primary objective of the study was to examine how the students perceive the reaction to the practices that the Declaration introduces. Besides studying their judgments the informedness of the students was also examined, in other words, what they know about the Declaration, what the sources of their information are etc.

However, before we present the results of the research we will present the Bologna Declaration in brief, defining it, acquainting the reader with its basic principles and presenting a brief view of its beginnings and development process. This review is given for the purpose of comparing data, which are based on the students' answers so that we could examine the extent of their acquaintance with the Declaration and how it is applied in practice.

### **KEY GOALS OF THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION**

The Bologna Declaration is the 'Joint Declaration of European Education Ministers signed in Bologna 19.06.1999'<sup>3</sup> and represents the School Reform for establishing a European Higher Education Area by 2010. In broad terms but very precisely, the Declaration is:

- 'a clearly defined common goal: to create a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education;
- a deadline: the European space for higher education should be completed in 2010;
- a set of specified objectives:
- the adoption of a common framework of readable and comparable degrees, 'also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement';
- the introduction of undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries, with first degrees no shorter than 3 years and relevant to the labour market;
- ECTS-compatible credit systems, also covering lifelong learning activities;
- a European dimension in quality assurance, with comparable criteria and methods;
- the elimination of remaining obstacles to the free mobility of students (as well as trainees and graduates) and teachers (as well as researchers and higher education administrators)'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bolonjska deklaracija (The Bologna Declaration) <http://www.unsa.ba/pdf/Bolonjska%20deklaracija.pdf> (Downloaded 10.08.2007.)

<sup>4</sup> The Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education: an explanation <http://www.crue.org/eurec/bolognaexplanation.htm> (Downloaded 26.09.2007.)

The aim of this project is to achieve within the European Higher Education Area by 2010 the following:

1. easier mobility from one country to another—in order to continue studying or finding employment;
2. the attractiveness of European higher education for people from non-European countries, also for the purpose of coming to study and/or work in Europe;
3. a broad, high quality and advanced knowledge base, and ensuring the further development of Europe as a stable, peaceful and tolerant community<sup>5</sup>.

‘Every two years a Ministerial Conference is organised where Ministers responsible for higher education of all participating countries gather to evaluate the progress and to set guidelines and priorities for the upcoming period. The last conference took place in London in May 2007. Previous conferences were held in Bergen (2005), Berlin (2003), Prague (2001) and Bologna (1999)’<sup>6</sup>.

The development of the Bologna Declaration is based on the Sorbonne Declaration established on May 25, 1998 with the accent on ‘the central role of University regarding the development of cultural dimensions in Europe’<sup>7</sup>.

## THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Interestingly enough, not a single student has ever read the document of the Bologna Declaration so that sources are mostly hearsay, the following being what they had heard from: the media, their professors and other people. It means that the informants have based their attitude towards the Declaration merely on these sources. Although there are some differences in their judgments they are all, generally speaking, characterised by negative appraisals of application of the Declaration. In other words, students emphasise that the implementation of the Declaration on their Faculty makes studying more difficult than it was before. In order to understand the reasons for this negative attitude, we classified all their answers in two main groups.

The first group, taking into consideration their knowledge and notion about the Declaration, refers to the definition of the Declaration, its beginning and history and

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<sup>5</sup> What is the Bologna Process?

[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/EHEA2010/BolognaPedestrians\\_en.asp#P12\\_187](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/EHEA2010/BolognaPedestrians_en.asp#P12_187)  
(Downloaded 26.09.2007.)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Evropska zona visokog obrazovanja (The European Higher Education Area) <http://www.mapss.info/bolonja/deklaracija.pdf>. (Downloaded 26.09.2007.)

the relation between the Declaration and the EU. This also includes their opinion about the advantages and disadvantages of the Declaration.

The second group considers the students' reactions towards the practical implementation of the Declaration. To be exact, this group refers to their knowledge about the beginning of its application on their University, the basic elements of the Declaration applied on their Faculty, changes caused by the application of the Declaration, and their thoughts about the above mentioned as the most important issue in this paper.

## **STUDENT KNOWLEDGE CONCERNING THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION**

### **The beginning and history of the Bologna Declaration**

As we mentioned, students have not read the Bologna Declaration and are not acquainted with its history or with the Sorbonne Declaration and the Lisbon Convention either. Neither are they acquainted with other conventions and the meetings in Prague, Berlin, Bergen and London. They do not know either any dates concerning the constitution of the Declaration, nor who were the initiators and the signers of the Declaration. One student said that he is not acquainted with the beginning and the development of the Declaration with the words: 'I am not acquainted with it and I believe that nobody at my Faculty including our professors is'. Another student expressing revolt against the Declaration said: 'I do not know and I do not care for it!'. Such lack of interest is very common with the majority of the students included in my research and is partly caused by having no choice, as one of them stated: 'I have not heard about the Sorbonne Declaration and I am not acquainted with its development process and it is not important for me anyway since I do not have a choice!'

### **The Bologna Declaration and the EU**

As for the notion about the relation between the Declaration and the EU, four students connected the constitution of the Declaration with the EU. They suppose that the constitution of the Declaration is linked to the EU, as a female student says, and I quote: 'the Declaration is probably constituted by a body within the EU'. The others did not offer any information regarding these relations.

**Condition for entering the EU with regard to the Declaration**

Two students believe that the Declaration does not have anything to do with entering the EU while five students believe it has, as one student emphasises that 'the Bologna Declaration has great significance in the international negotiations for entering the EU and if only one link is left missing, surely the whole thing will come to a halt'. Three students believe that the Declaration is: 'an extenuating circumstance' for entering into the EU, as they said, and two stress: 'it is one of the conditions but not the most important one'. The remaining eight students said they do not know anything about the relationship between the Declaration and the EU.

**Defining the Bologna Declaration by the students**

Concerning the question, how would they define the Declaration, four students could not define the Declaration and were not acquainted with its principles at all, as one student said: 'I do not have any idea'. Another four students relate it with Europe and the EU. One of them said, 'the Bologna Declaration is to a dying the EU without real practical improvement of the educational system'. The others propose that it has to do with the 'unification of European higher education'. In the words of one student, 'The Declaration is a test of the system which has for its goal the purpose of unifying a part of Europe's higher education' while another student mentioned that 'the Declaration is important for the sharing of knowledge'. Three students relate it with the production of a cheap work force, because of the same educational system for all European countries. As one of them stated, 'It is a system for the production of a cheap work force in Europe'. For two students the Declaration means, as they said: 'a shorter period of studying and compressing of subjects' while the others stressed the reform of the educational system but in a negative way, as one student said: 'I cannot reach a definition because it is obvious that it is not clear to anyone what it means. It is still just an overall experiment, which for the time being has the greatest effect on the first year, in a negative way, because being so unclear it disturbs the work of all individuals'.

**The Goals of the Declaration**

For the majority of students i.e. for eleven of them the aim of the Declaration would be the globalisation, standardisation or unifying of degrees from European Universities, as one of them said: 'unification of profession, system and knowledge everywhere'.

Another student also claims: 'I think that its goal is the establishment of universal educational standards', adding: 'as well as an international exchange of knowledge, ideas and experience'. Two students believe that the Declaration makes studying more expensive. Three students think that the goal of the Declaration is education shortening, as one student said: 'probably to disqualify long-time study, either you study or you do not'. They also added: 'easier studies and more accessible studying'. Four students do not have any clue regarding the aims of the Declaration.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of adopting the Declaration**

More than a half of them or, precisely, eleven students believe that the adoption of the Declaration is important for the connecting of people and sharing of knowledge, although they also point out that 'the climate in Serbia is not adequate for its implementation', as one of them stressed. Two of these students favour universities abroad and believe that the quality of education is better abroad than in Serbia, so that they see a chance not only for the adoption of Western values in the educational system, but also the possibility of going abroad for further study and professional development. One student is hesitant because the lectures or courses are mandatory and he does not like pressure. Seven students are against the adoption of the Declaration because they believe that they are damaged by its use. As a reason for this, they stated a shorter period of education, higher schooling fees, a more compact programme and mandatory lectures. One student does not have an opinion of its significance.

### **Knowledge about ECTS**

ECTS or the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System as a credit system for mobility of students across Europe do not mean anything for the majority of students i.e. for fourteen of them. They do not know what ECTS means and one of them added that the professors are not informed either. For six students it is only a credit system or scoring system concerning their grades. More precisely, they stated that you need 60 points all together until the end of the year and they added that the Declaration changes the way of grading, meaning that it introduces besides qualitative (a grade is determined from 5 to 10), also some other different types of evaluation or quantitative scoring. They state that quantitative scoring, which for them represents a novelty, refers to attendance and activeness in class that is now also being scored. All of this has to equal 60 points and affects the final grade.

## **THE REACTION OF THE STUDENTS REGARDING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION**

### **The changes caused by the application of the Declaration**

The majority or fifteen students express their negative attitude towards applying the Bologna Declaration on their Faculty. As reasons for their dissatisfaction, they provide the following: mandatory lectures, expensive scholarship, harder passing to budget scholarship funding, an inappropriately extensive programme in comparison with the shorter schooling period and as one student added, 'the Declaration brought stagnation in the quality of lectures'. Another student is dissatisfied because he 'is spending too much time on the Faculty' and apart from studying, does not have time for any other activities. One more student said: 'it is easier to pass exams because of numerous colloquiums'. The others said that 'everybody is confused and they do not know anything'. They also blame the professors for not being informed about the Declaration, which also brings about its poor implementation.

### **Conditions for passing on to the next year and the mobility of exams**

Besides the important aforementioned changes conditioned by the educational reform, as to have a more precise image about the given phenomenon, we will also state other important points. First, we shall call attention to the changes which refer to the terms for passing on to the next year of study. Before the implementation of the Bologna Declaration at the Belgrade University, students had the right to enroll for the next year with the possibility of transferring some exams from the past year. However, as the Declaration has a goal to shorten the years of studying, students are obliged to meet terms by passing all the exams before enrolling into the next year of study. A majority of the respondents included in this research state that they received this announcement from their professors at the beginning of the year. Nevertheless, as the students were not happy with the application of the Declaration they went on a strike in February this year that lasted for three weeks. They asked for lower school fees, to have the right to take two exams into the next year, as did generations before them. They achieved the right to take two exams into the next year, lower school fees and that those who have an average grade of 8.5 or higher can pass automatically to budget scholarship funding (this I heard only afterwards). Because of the strike, missed lectures were to be compensated for on Saturdays

every week and the school year was extended for another week. However, three students do not know which conditions are needed for passing to the next year.

### **Financial system**

Six students do not know if anything has changed regarding self-financing of scholarships because they are on state budget scholarships. Four students think that nothing has changed, as one of them said: 'I think that the price of scholarship has not changed by the implementation of the Bologna Declaration'. Seven students said that the scholarship is different from before and they strongly voiced their conviction that 'the ministry has cut the budget for faculties; therefore, fewer students are on budget funding'. In addition, the scholarship has gone up. Three students said that it has not, but they believe it will in the future. As one of them stated, 'for the time being it has not but I believe it will and doing so on account of the students without any significant improvement in quality' and another student thinks that the faculties will fund studying and that the budget will be cancelled.

### **Relationship between professors and students**

To the question: whether anything had changed in the relationship between professors and students, I received many different answers from the students. Their answers are based on comparing their own experience and the experience of other fellow students from higher years. Sixteen students believe the relationship has not changed and that it is the same as before, with the words: 'I think the relationship has not changed, it has stayed the same' and 'in my opinion it has not, only that now they keep closer evidence of attendance in classes'. Four students state that some academic staffs are tense, confused, strict and more formal than before. A student confirms with following words: 'The teachers are confused and we the students are angry because they are confusing us' and another student said, that 'they are strict because they have to adapt to a program that is unknown to them'. One more student said, 'Now the staff are acting like tyrants because they are adapting to a program that is unknown to them and they do not have any work plan'.

### **Staff informativeness about the Declaration based upon the opinion of students**

Students believe that the Declaration is not clear to staff either, because they have tried to explain it to them but they did not know exactly what the Declaration represents or



means. One of the students said: 'some of them tried to explain' while another added that 'they do not know what the Declaration is'. However, only a few staff succeeded in explaining, although only 'some aspects of the Declaration', as they stated, precisely the system of scoring and how many lectures they are allowed to be absent from, as well as that the condition for passing to the next year is to give all the exams, 'and nothing else', as students emphasised.

### **The absence of students from the lectures**

The majority or fifteen students attend lectures regularly; two students do not, while three are trying to make an effort. They have a right to be absent three to five times in one semester, depending on the subject. Asked what the consequences were in case this number exceeds the given limit, six students do not know what the consequences would be while eight students said that they would not have the right to ratify the semester and would further lose the right for the final exam. Two students believe that it would mean less points in the activities before the final exam, and as one of them says: 'the teachers are angry at first, but later they let you pass'. One student believes that they would lose the right to go on studying while three students said it would mean lower grades. Thirteen students said that some staff allow more absence from lectures than previously defined, while one student said that 'irresponsibility is in question'. Five students stated the staff do not allow more absence and one student does not know.

### **Advantages of the application of the Declaration—assumptions based on student's experience**

Twelve students do not see any advantages to the application of the Declaration. As one of the students stated, 'The quality of study has not improved, for now it is even more difficult to remain within the student status and keep up with the imposed pace'. Two students said that application is 'very bad' and added that 'the Declaration is probably a good idea but we do not know the right way to use it'. Three students believe it is better because the Declaration gives the opportunity for all the activities during the year to be included in the final grade and not only one final exam. Contrary to this, one student said that 'all the countries should never be the same, neither should all the people be the same, nor can they', considering an identical system of higher education throughout Europe. Another student said that the grading is obsolete and the others

think that grading harms them because it does not take into consideration individual abilities, but acts as a system of grading moderation. A student, who emphasises that evaluation is not adapted to an individual, illustrates this opinion with the words, 'because some people prefer only to work and not talk about their work'. One more student stated that he does not have time for anything but lectures, expressing this with the words, 'the lectures are mandatory and because of this I cannot earn a living and study at the same time. I do not have time for anything else!'

## CONCLUSION

From the above given results we can see that students have a very poor knowledge of the beginnings, history of and principles given in the Declaration. They give several different definitions about the Declaration but as regards the aims of the Declaration it becomes clearer what the Declaration exactly means to them. For most students, the Declaration is a unification of higher education in Europe. Their knowledge is based on mere notions about the Declaration and its elements, which is further more based on 'mere rumours' and they do not even make the effort to obtain precise and authenticated information on the Declaration. At the same time they are confused and blame the academic staff for the lack of information about how the Declaration functions in practice as well as for its bad application. Generally, there is a negative attitude towards the application of the Declaration owing to the expense of school fees, mandatory lectures and extensive courses, which has not been cut down proportionally regarding the years of study.

Nevertheless, the majority of students are in favour of the acceptance of the Declaration in general at the Belgrade University, because of its significance in connecting people and the sharing of knowledge and experience, yet, in their words: 'The conditions are not yet adequate in Serbia for the implementation of the Declaration'.

## REFERENCES

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