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## **National & Inter-European Challenges in Bologna Process Implementation**

BEST Symposium on Education, Lviv  
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## **Abstract - Summary**

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A BEST Symposium on Education is a public event of the Board of European Students of Technology. This event creates a forum in which students from all over Europe can meet for one week, and state their opinions on hot topics of education during round-table discussions. The outcomes of the symposia will be brought to the decision-makers, so that they will have the possibility of listening to the students' point of view before changing the concept of education.

The Educational Committee of BEST (EduCo) and Local BEST Group Lviv organised a Symposium on Education on the topic of "National and Inter-European challenges in Bologna Process Implementation". The event aimed to gather students' feedback on the biggest educational reform taking place in Europe: the Bologna Process (BP). The purpose of the Bologna Process is to create a common area of higher education by 2010 with the view to harmonize academic degree standards and quality assurance standards throughout Europe and to improve the competitiveness and attractiveness of European universities.

The process itself is already in its halfway, but there are still many challenges to overcome in the implementation process. The execution of the set of reforms is up to each country and the approaches can be diverse due to different reasons, such as due to different starting points in time, different priorities and involvement. However, in order to achieve the goal and set up a European Higher Education Area by 2010 it is essential that all of the countries involved would consider how to improve the implementation process. One of the important aspects here is to gather as much feedback as possible from different stakeholders in this process. Here, the students should be considered as one of the important stakeholders. After all, students are the target group of the designers of higher education, the ones that experience through their studies the implementation of BP.

The goal of this event was to make the students from different universities more aware of the whole process, and discuss about the possible challenges and concerns appearing in the implementation process.

The discussion sessions were divided under three different topics. The first discussion day aimed to give the students an insight to the Bologna Process in general and to analyse the development of new degree structure and credit system. The second discussion day covered the possible challenges related to the implementation process, and in the last discussion day the students' ideas about how to enhance the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area were gathered and analysed.

The outcomes from the discussions revealed that there are many improvements to be done in order to fulfil all the requirements stated in the action lines in the Bologna Process. Problems with new credit systems and degree cycles, student mobility and quality assurance are apparent in many universities in Europe. Moreover, the majority of the participants feel that there is a lack of student involvement in the implementation process, mainly because of the role of students is underestimated by other stake holders. Hopefully this will be taken under consideration in the near future, and the results of this symposium will be found as valuable feedback for the decision makers in the Bologna Process.

## 1. Outline of the symposium

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### 1.1 Background

In 1999, European Commission initiated officially the Bologna Process, as the education ministers from around 30 European countries signed this joint declaration in order to establish a European Area of Higher Education by 2010. Thus, the aim of the process was to create a common framework in Europe in order to make the various national higher education systems to converge towards a more transparent system in order to encourage the mobility of the students, academics and researchers.

Nevertheless, there have been many challenges in the countries that are involved in this process. Obviously there is a vast variety of the approaches towards the national implementation that are related to significant changes in the engineering education during the last years. These challenges are greater for the countries that joined the Bologna Process after 1999.

However, in order to overcome these challenges and improve the efficiency of the implementation process, all related and interested stakeholders must be actively involved in it, namely the students.

The Educational Committee of BEST (Board of European Students of Technology) aims to give regular students an opportunity to share their ideas and visions on higher education, and to have their voice heard at higher level. This is done by the involvement of different projects and programs organised by the European Union and other Institutions and which are in a direct relation to the improvement of the quality and value of engineering education in Europe.

A BEST Symposium on Education, organised together with BEST Educational Committee and one local BEST group, is an educational BEST event, where students take part in discussions and have the opportunity to express their own ideas on educational matters. These events last usually for a week and gather twenty to thirty students from different parts of Europe.

A Symposium consists of daily speeches and presentations, which are given by professors or other professionals working closely on the discussed theme, and are then followed by discussion groups where each topic is handled from various aspects in order to bring up the different views of the participants. The conclusions and results of these discussions are then gathered and summed up into reports which present the opinions of the participants and offer hints or proposals on what kind of development and/or improvement could be made concerning the topic at hand. Such reports are consequently forwarded to the interested stakeholders in education, or directly presented by BEST members in educational-related conferences around Europe.

In September 2006 BEST organised a Symposium in Lviv, Ukraine, with the topic of "National and Inter-European challenges in Bologna Process Implementation", where challenges of the Bologna Process implementation were discussed from the students' point of view together with the academics and experts on educational issues.

### 1.2 Aim of the event

The main objectives of the BEST Symposium on Education in Lviv were to:

- Raise the awareness of the Bologna Process among students.
- Evaluate the challenges and efforts of the implementation of the BP in the students' home universities and to provide the various stakeholders with their valuable feedback and ideas.
- Give students the possibility to discuss on educational issues and getting their feedback and ideas.

### **1.3 Overview of the academic schedule**

The BEST Symposium on Education in Lviv consisted of an introduction day, three discussion days and a day with a case study.

During the introduction day the participants were introduced to the topic through the presentations given by the academics and experts. Also general goals and expectations of the event were presented. All the participants had a chance to have an overview of the introduction materials prepared by BEST Educational Committee.

The discussion days were filled with topic introduction presentations given by professors or other professionals working closely on the discussed theme, and followed by discussion sessions where each daily topic was handled from various aspects in order to bring up the different views of the participants. As for the discussion sessions, all participants were divided into two groups. New groups were formed on every discussion day in order to give the students a possibility to work together with different people.

The theme of the event "National and Inter-European challenges in Bologna Process Implementation" was divided to three different subtopics, where each of them was a topic for a different discussion day. The topics were:

- Day 1: "Implementation of the Bologna Process: Comparable degrees and credit system".
- Day 2: "Implementation of the Bologna Process: Challenges in the countries that sign the declaration later in time".
- Day 3: "Attractiveness of the Bologna Process".

The outcomes from the discussion sessions are presented in this report.

Last day of the academic schedule consisted of a case study under the topic of "Bologna Process in the ideal university from the students' point of view". The task was to brainstorm and put down ideas of how an ideal university would look like from the students' point of view. They had to consider all aspects of Bologna Process and present keywords and draft plans on how the best implementation would look like.

### **1.4 People involved**

The symposium gathered people from different areas of interest. The professors and experts group that was invited to the event consisted of academics who are involved with education locally and academics from other European universities, who are also involved in the work for Thematic Networks (TN) supported by the European Commission.

There were 17 participants from different technical universities in Europe invited to take part in the symposium. The event was also promoted among

local students and few students from the Lviv Polytechnic National University took part in the discussion sessions. However, since those students participated only in few of the discussion sessions, and not in the entire event, their names are not listed in this report.

The list of the people involved in the event is following:

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## **2. Discussion day 1: “Implementation of the Bologna Process: Comparable degrees and Credit System”**

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### **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this discussion day was to give the students an insight to the implementation of the Bologna Process. The goal was to analyse the development of new degree structure with easily readable and comparable degrees and the establishment of a system of credits.

In the discussion session the participants discussed first about the awareness of Bologna Process among students and analysed the situation of the implementation in different universities in Europe. They shared their opinions and ideas about the European Higher Education Area and talked about its benefits and drawbacks.

Secondly the students discussed about the system of study cycles and credits in their universities. The importance of the Diploma Supplement and ECTS credit system was analysed.

### **2.2 Outcomes from the discussion session**

The implementation of the Bologna Process has started differently for different universities in different countries and the awareness of the BP among students seems to differ a lot as well. Many of them know about the changes done in their universities, such as changes in the study cycles, introducing the new credit system and improvement in the mobility of students. However in some countries the implementation goes very slowly and is in the very beginning of the starting process, and therefore the awareness of students is very low. For many students, for example from the universities in Turkey, Russian Federation and Ukraine, joining the BP declaration has not made any changes in their academic life so far. In Ukraine the mobility of students seems to be very difficult due to financial problems. In Russian Federation there seem to be also problems due to the economical and political situations. The students also see a problem with adapting the teachers to the new way of thinking, which can take a very long time.

However, many of the students agreed that awareness of the Bologna Process and its implementation should be improved and students should be added to the discussion and decision making process. So far there is not much information given out about the ongoing reform and in some cases there seems to be even a lack of interest from students' side. Those students who have the interest to get more information, they have to look it up by themselves.

According to the participants there are many ways of increasing the awareness among students about the BP. One idea would be including students more to the discussions by organizing symposia, conferences, etc. Also, it would be a good idea to have a special information centre in the university which can be, for example, an internet site or a forum. The information could be also spread out by university newspapers, information e-mails and presented by the professors in the lectures. They agreed that spreading the information should start already at a very early stage of the

students' studies. When giving out the information it is very important to bring out the main points regarding how the BP influences the students.

When discussing about the advantages and disadvantages of the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the students brought out the importance for the three main stake holders: universities, companies and students. The main benefits of the EHEA for the companies from students' point would be an open labour market with a possibility to have open-minded and competent workers, who are able to adapt to new experiences and to life abroad, if needed. For the universities, EHEA would increase the co-operation and collaboration between the Higher Education Institutions and increase the number of exchanges of students. Quality of education is also expected to be improved, which would increase the attractiveness of different universities and study programmes. For the students, the benefits would include more experience and improved qualifications, enhanced language skills, more possibilities for mobility, further recognition of the skills, possibilities to find the desired job in the job market.

The negative points of the EHEA from students' point of view would include the possibility for brain drain and its effect to the economy of the country. One of the challenges of EHEA would also be teaching a common language to use inside EHEA, since European countries have different languages and foreign language skills differ a lot from country to country.

The implementation of comparable degrees and new study cycles in different universities has generated different opinions among students. Some people think that the new system is preferable, because it gives more opportunities for the labour market, since in many universities the first cycle is shorter and would give a benefit for the students who have to study and work at the same time (e.g. students in Russian Federation, Ukraine). However, for some students the new cycle system would result to a longer study period since in many universities the first diploma will be issued after the second cycle and not after the first one. For example in a system with 3+2 (Poland) or with 1+2+2 (France) this could mean 1 year of extra studies before getting a diploma, when compared to the old system 4+2. Nevertheless, the students agreed that the qualification of students, after passing the first compulsory 2 cycles, will be definitely higher, since with the old system not many of the students continued their studies in the Master programme. Some students also pointed out that now in some universities it can be more difficult to study a second master degree in another discipline since the first two cycles can be detached together in a great extent and applying for another master degree may require for example 3 years of studies instead of 2.

The importance of Diploma Supplement for students was also discussed in the session. Very few of the participants have already received the document. In general many of them find the paper useful and important for getting recognition for their qualifications and it is needed for applying to further studies or for an international job. However some students said that this document will not give them any benefits because many companies will not find it necessary. Students also think that the Diploma Supplement should not be updated during lifetime according to the life long learning concept.

The students also shared opinions about the credit system used in their universities. Some students seem to have similar systems, some different. Most of them are aware of the new credit system - ECTS - and think that it is just useful for them, if they do mobility abroad. However, they admit that for many of them there are still problems with recognition of the courses

they have taken abroad. In some cases the received credits may not be recognized at all (e.g. in Ukraine) and in some cases the students have recognition only for some of the courses they have taken abroad (e.g. in Slovenia). Moreover, sometimes the students have to take extra exams at their home universities after returning from their studies abroad.

Even though the concept behind the credit system is quite fixed, there seem to be big differences between different courses in terms of how much the students have to work for getting passed. The participants think that the credit system should be measurable and it should measure only the work done at school like hours of lectures and practical work. The work done at home should not be included since it is very hard to evaluate it.

## 3. Discussion day 2: “Implementation of the Bologna Process: Challenges in the countries that sign the declaration later in time”

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### 3.1 Introduction

The goal of the BP is precise and understandable: to set up a European space for Higher Education. However, the means to reach this goal are not clearly defined. The content of the declaration itself remains rather vague and the suggestions are therefore interpreted very broadly. There is a calendar agreed upon that has a potential to be followed, nevertheless the process itself does not really seem to fit in a timeframe. The implementation is up to each country and the approaches can be diverse due to different reasons (e.g. different starting points and times, different priorities and involvement).

In general some states take the Bologna reforms more seriously than others and are leading the implementation process. However, others have still many challenges to overcome in order to reach the goal. The aim of this discussion day was to discuss about these challenges from a student point of view.

First the students brainstormed and discussed about the general challenges they could think of when talking about the implementation process. The discussion continued with the topics of quality assurance periods and ended with analysing recognition of degrees and study periods.

### 3.2 Outcomes from the discussion session

The discussion started with brainstorming on general challenges of implementing the Bologna Process. For the majority of the participants the biggest issue seemed to be the lack of student involvement in the implementation process. Other issues concern the involvement of teachers, the recognition of courses, and the difficulty for people to understand and to apply the changes. Financial issues and time problems were also mentioned as factors that can slow down the BP. For those countries where the implementation time is much shorter, the students proposed the method of learning from others' example, where universities could cooperate and share their experiences for a successful and fast implementation of BP.

When discussing further on the challenges for the countries that joined later, the participants identified, based on their own experience, some difficulties that their universities are encountering:

- **Different starting points:** some countries had already a two cycle system or accreditation system (e.g. Austria, France) while others didn't have any (e.g. Bosnia Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia);
- **Different starting times:** the countries that signed the declaration in 2003 /2005 are not really advanced with the implementation (Croatia, Serbia);
- **Different priorities:** BP is understood as a package of reforms but some countries tend to implement only some action lines properly while neglecting others (e.g. there are problems with interdisciplinary and flexibility with the degree system in Slovenia, no quality

assurance system and no student representation in Romania, no students involvement in quality assurance in Poland);

- **Different involvement:** countries tend to consider the reforms that they have made to be sufficient but a closer look would reveal superficial implementation and lots of space for improvements (e.g. all signatory countries claim that ECTS is well implemented but a closer look and participants' input reveals improper practice).

In general universities seem to consider the implementation of BP as just fulfilling some action lines instead of treating it as a set of reforms for creating a European Space for Higher Education.

The students expressed also their opinion regarding the situation of the implementation of the three cycle system and following judgement was given:

- **Slovakia:** the introduction of the three cycle system was mostly done by transferring the old types of degrees into the new structure without changing the length or content;
- **Spain:** a Master of Science degree is now becoming the minimum qualification needed for a professional engineer, rather than a Bachelor of Science degree and professional bodies can require re-evaluation as the qualifications change. Due to less subjects in the study plan new engineers are perceived as "less qualified" by the companies who will prefer employees from the older generation;
- **Turkey:** a practice of simple re-labelling and not substantial reconstruction of the old study programmes occurs, resulting squeezing the subjects from 5 years into 4 years with less practical learning;
- **Estonia:** The degree cycle changed its length from 4 + 2 to 3 + 2. In the beginning the workload and the curricula was overcrowded but now being redesigned;
- **Ukraine:** No reforms done yet;
- **Austria:** More specific approach, students know better what they have to do in order to complete their education. The procedures to move inside the educational system are more transparent;
- **Russian Federation:** The labour market has no awareness about the new degree structure and problems with the acceptance of the graduates with new degrees can occur;
- **Poland:** Difficulties in setting up really student oriented study programmes occur (e.g. there are difficulties to motivate students and the programmes are not oriented to learning outcomes);
- **Romania:** Difficulties in setting up student oriented study programmes (difficulties to motivate students, the programmes are not oriented to learning outcomes);

On the whole, due to unclear procedures and bureaucracy, the students feel an increase of transitional problems between different cycles and the study structure to be more rigid instead of more flexible.

The participants also agreed that students' involvement in restructuring the curricula in their universities is less than it should be. In some countries (e.g. Austria, France, Estonia, Spain) students have representatives in different committees and bodies in the university, but still their role in decision making is rather low. In other countries (e.g. Ukraine, Russian Federation) there is no student representation in committees of the university and therefore no role in deciding the curricula.

As a general impression of students, the departments seem to decide on the curricula more in the department meetings, behind the “closed doors” for students. On the other hand the students admitted that teachers have certainly more knowledge in the matter of deciding over the curriculum due to their better overview of the subject. Students’ voice should be heard but considering students’ lack of experience and information the final decisions should be made by teachers.

### ***Quality assurance***

One of the most important aspects of BP - quality assurance (QA) was also discussed during the discussion session. However, students admitted their little experience and lack of awareness on this issue. Despite their lack of experience and authority in the matter, they strongly pointed out that students should be able to change the teachers that don’t complete their job.

Surveying among the participants about the quality assurance system in their universities and students role in it, following responds were given:

- **Romania, Ukraine** : no quality assurance system or QA institution is known among students;
- **Portugal**: there are some organizations dealing with quality assurance, but students are not aware of them;
- **Spain**: based on a survey among students made in the beginning of each semester, teachers are assessed and can be less/more paid in the results are negative/positive.
- **Estonia**: a letter is sent to each student’s home asking for a complete evaluation (study program, teachers). The evaluation is very serious and also taken into account.
- **Austria**: an evaluation is done by students for each course

The role of the university and companies in the formation process of an engineer was discussed and the participants agreed that BP is very important for companies. Harmonization of degrees in all over Europe would make the recruitment process easier and also raise awareness of the skills and knowledge of their future employees.

Some solutions proposed by students for a better QA of the educational system were:

- Actual student involvement in all levels and all steps of Quality Assurance
- Publishing all results concerning quality assurance and external evaluation – public reports
- Follow up and consequences of evaluations should be clearer.

### ***Student mobility, recognition of degrees and study periods***

One of the aims of the Bologna Process is to enable and increase the mobility of students. Still, the main academic obstacle seems to be recognition of degrees and study periods.

The main reason for this problem was considered to be related to the current relationships between universities and the trust issue. As different countries have different study methods and different evaluation systems it can be difficult to gain trust among universities considering each others’ programmes, systems and organization. Moreover, due to the different

implementation of ECTS credit system in different universities (e.g. different way of measurement of students' workload) further problems with recognition can occur.

The students also brought up the fact that currently in many universities there are too little, in some cases even none research possibilities in the first and second cycle of their study period.

The other challenges pointed out regarding the BP concern practical issues of student mobility. According to students' opinion scholarships granted by the universities for going abroad are not very high and in some countries relatively few people can afford to go and study abroad. Providing student's affordable accommodation and also increasing the number of grants/loans for them would help to improve this issue.

## **4. Discussion day 3: “Attractiveness of the Bologna Process”**

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### **4.1 Introduction**

According to the Bologna Declaration the European Higher Education Area should be seen as a partner of higher education systems in other regions of the world. It should stimulate balanced student and staff exchange and cooperation between higher education institutions.

It is believed that implementing the Declaration everywhere in Europe would help to increase the global attractiveness of universities and institutions in Europe. However, it has been also underlined that structural reforms alone are not enough for the continent's ambitions to become a worldwide reference in higher education. How to assure presence and commitment of high-quality teachers and researchers and how to deal with the brain drain are some of the issues that the involved states must consider. The aim of this discussion day was to discuss about these issues and analyse how the attractiveness of the common European Higher Education Area can be reached.

### **4.2 Outcomes from the discussion session**

The outcomes from a short brainstorming over the definition of attractiveness of European Higher Education Area revealed the following keywords: possibility to study abroad and to make comparisons between educational systems, life styles, possibility to have internships and work abroad, high quality programs, accessibility, mobility, sharing experience, meeting foreign people, communication, challenges and opportunities.

The most important aspects for students regarding the attractiveness of the educational system are the quality of teaching, the quality of students, mobility and universal recognition of studies. Other relevant issues mentioned are high quality of the curricula, cooperation between universities and good facilities in universities for practical work.

The experts attending the session brought up a new idea for students to debate on: “The universities and Higher Education bodies should focus more on a single specialisation area in order to increase the competitiveness level among universities. The EU would provide support to these Higher Educational Centres in order to build a strong competence in a selected area.”

According to the students' feedback on this idea, creating specialised centres is not needed and also not a solution for increasing attractiveness of EHEA. The students found it to be unfavourable due to the little flexibility and also very often students don't know at the beginning which field they would choose and where they would like to study. In general, there are many factors that influence their decision to go to study abroad and many of those reasons are other than educational. The main things attracting the students are the country, the language (English is preferred) and the high level of teaching. Among other reasons they named behaviour and diversity of people, different life styles, reputation and promotion.

However, it was mentioned that home universities do not prepare students enough for the challenges they might encounter abroad and improvements should be done in this area. The main concerns are related to language skills.

The students agreed that the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area can be best achieved by developing an international network of co-operation with various partner institutions around the globe. Exchanging teachers and researchers would help to establish this co-operation. The quality of courses and teaching, the facilities and the resources were considered to be equally important aspects. However on the same time it is also important that the universities would promote themselves. Creating a good image of education in Europe and promoting it via media is essential. One presented idea was that the people who work on the issue of attractiveness of EHEA should make a research on the educational systems in universities outside Europe and learn from other countries practice (e.g. American universities have a very strong image that attracts students from around the globe).

When discussing on the issue of how to promote European Universities there were many ideas brought up. It would be good to provide more scholarships or other benefits for students for studying abroad. That would attract foreign people, especially people from developing countries outside Europe. As an example the participants mentioned the case of Germany who offers scholarships to Chinese people, the case of Sweden where education is free, and the case of Portugal where only foreign students do not pay fees. Another example of the international co-operation nowadays is the *Erasmus Mundus* program, which is a scholarship programme for students from third countries. This program aims to enhance quality in European higher education and to promote intercultural understanding through co-operation with third countries.

Social dimension was also considered to be important factor when promoting EHEA. The countries part of the BP has to ensure good conditions and support for foreign students in order to convince them to come to study in their universities.

When discussing about how to reach attractiveness in front of the third stakeholders – companies, the students agreed that setting up a homogeneous and harmonised educational system and providing a universal guarantee for qualifications would make the recruitment process for companies much easier. Therefore the attractiveness of EHEA towards companies would also be increased.

### **Concerns of the attractiveness of BP**

The students agreed that after starting the BP remarkable changes and transformations have taken place inside European educational field. However, the question is if those structural reforms are enough for the continent's ambitions to become a worldwide reference in higher education. It is believed that Europe's ability to keep on attracting high-quality teachers and researchers is dependent on whether or not it is able to provide them with the resources and working conditions they need.

One important concern discussed was brain drain. Making Europe one of the most attractive higher education areas can result to emigration of talented students, researchers and teaching staff in developing countries and countries in transition. It is believed that this can endanger the creation of

a cohesive higher education area. It can also influence the economic and social development of the countries encountering brain drain.

The experts' response to the issue of brain drain was that it will not affect Europe so much when the emigration is done inside the continent. In the context of an ideal European Higher Educational Area with specialised centres the researchers and students will move naturally, according to their development and needs. However, the problem can appear when researchers and talented students go and work outside Europe (mostly in USA) bringing their contribution to the countries that did not invest anything in their education.

As one of the solutions for brain drain the participants thought about contracts between students and universities which would oblige the students to come back to their country, or contracts between companies and students in order for students to complete their research; still none of these methods would be fair. The optimal solution is that the university and the country create encouraging and proper conditions for students, teachers and researchers so that they would use the possibilities to study and work abroad only temporarily, and would return back to their home countries afterwards.

A sensitive topic discussed at the end concerned paid or free education. In this matter the participants identified a mentality of people who consider that paying for the education would assure them better education. On one hand paid education could increase quality and competitiveness, but on the other hand it would also introduce social differences and problems for students who want to study but can not afford it due to financial problems. However, the students agreed that having paid education is more productive, goal oriented and effective. Despite all these arguments and the obvious example of USA universities where education is paid, the students mentioned about some private universities (France, Portugal, and Romania) which are worse than the public ones despite the tuition fees. As a conclusion, the quality of education in each country and university is totally different. The students that want to make a good choice have to gather as much information as possible.

## Credits

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