

The Implementation of the Bologna Reform Policies in Slovakia

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“The Bologna process is named after the Bologna Declaration. The primary goal of the accords is the coordination and harmonization of the various European higher education systems without losing their colourful diversity and individual features, thereby making European higher education even more attractive for students and scholars from all over the world. The Bologna Declaration aims to create a European higher education Area by 2010” (Sprievodca 2006, 8). The aim of this study is manifold. Firstly, we will try to present the formation of the Slovakian nation state, the national higher education, their particularities and main agents, which all provided the context for the Bologna policies. Secondly, in the main part of this study, there will be shown the implementation of the objectives of the Bologna Declaration and the follow-up conferences. In addition, there will also be discussed the strategic goals of Slovakian higher education policy, the challenges, the success and failures in their introduction.

The Pre-Bologna state of Slovak higher education

Independent Slovakia was established merely 18 years ago, but the origins of its higher education system date back to the 1920s. After the World War 1 a new country was formed on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Until the foundation of the Republic of Slovakia in 1993 Slovak higher education had been an integral part of the uniform Czechoslovakian system, which as László (2008: 46) argues “was neither dual nor linear in structure”.

This means that formally there was a uniform higher education system, where the higher education institutions and their degrees were equal. The law does not make distinctions between university and non-university institutions, but functionally the contours of a binary system can clearly be observed. The system has been dominated by the universities and university-level institutions (academies, institutes), which are substituted by specialized, small vocationally-oriented institutions (*vysoká škola*) in such study areas as law, management and business or international relations. The study time varies from four to six years.

The foundations of this basically new system were laid on 1 July 1990 with the new Higher Education Act of 172/1990 (*Zákon o vysokých školách*). From then on, higher education studies could be pursued on different levels (*Zákon 1990, § 21*)¹. “Although the act itself gives priority to parallel courses, it does not exclude the linear system consisting of various phases” (Laszló 2006: 117). The new law has created the basis for previously unknown Bachelor programs, which were mainly organized on a tuition-fee arrangement for part-time students. In the wake of transition the university network started to expand, and there were established new universities and faculties in the existing ones. As one can observe, the massification was channelled toward the university sector. This sector experienced the academic drift phenomena: several changes in the names of the institutions (e.g. from academies or institutes to universities). This symbolic process was followed by the political strengthening by means of the laws. In the transition period one main social-political trend marked the Slovakian higher education system: the massification and continuous expansion of institutional networks. The system, in tune with other Central European coun-

¹ Higher educational institutions can award diplomas or bachelors' (Bc.) degrees. Students finishing their studies can be awarded the following academic titles: magister (Mgr) degree at universities, theological, artistic institutions; engineering (*inžinier* [Ing.]) degree at technical, economic and agronomical institutions; general practitioner (*doktor všeobecnej medicíny* [MUDr.]) at medical schools, or veterinary (*doktor veterinárnej medicíny* [[MVDr.]) at veterinary schools. (Laszló 2008, 52.)

tries, experienced a continuous increase in the number of students in higher education. Between 1992 and 2003 the number of students in Slovak higher education institutions rose from 64,311 to 136,922, which means that the number of students increased by more than 200 percent (213.9 percent, to be precise) (László 2008). However, the student/teacher ratio has remained imbalanced, since faculties have not expanded at the same speed as student numbers have increased, indeed, there has emerged a growing gap between them. Additionally, the students within distance learning programs have quadrupled. The institutions have been highly interested in these programs, because of low running costs and tuition fees (which represent a considerable amount of the institutional budget). The state subsidies have not followed the expansion and growing costs either, in fact, there has been a decrease in subsidies. During this period, Slovakian higher education began to introduce the credit system, however, this process was not well coordinated on the political-administrative level (lack of proper legal regulation). The design of the credit system has been influenced by the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The institutional and faculty autonomy have affected the implementation, since there was a large diversity in credit practices until 2002.

In addition, universities initiated other curricular and structural innovations. For example there began an internal restructuring of study programs. The four-, five- or six-year higher education programs were divided into two subsequent periods: a basic studies phase (two or three years) and a main studies phase (two years), the former being completed by passing a comprehensive exam and required to enter the latter. Also called a “little final exam”, its results contribute to those of the actual final examination at the end of the whole course of studies (László 2008, 54). The first legislative enactment on higher education standards took effect in 1990, exactly at the same time when universities in Czechoslovakia were granted their autonomy. With the enactment 172/1990 (Law

172/0990) higher education accreditation was introduced. The accreditation board assesses quality by examining the feasibility of the different programs and departments and also evaluates faculties annually (László 2008, 48).

Intermediary organizations

The Ministry of Education is the main policy agent managing the implementation procedure regarding the Bologna process in Slovakia. The country's representatives have participated at the Bologna and follow-up conferences. They have signed all the relevant documents, starting with the Bologna Declaration, and all further suggestions and objectives were gradually incorporated into state laws and regulations. In addition, the representatives of the Conference of Rectors in Higher Education in Slovakia have taken part in the meetings organized by the European University Association and other organizations, which offer policy suggestions to the ministerial and inter-ministerial conferences.

The other main policy agent is the Bologna Follow-up Group, whose role is that of an intermediary between intergovernmental, supranational and national levels, especially through its national support teams. Several European associations and institutions dealing with higher education problems provide the Group with support and counsel.² The Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation (SAAIC) effectively supports the international cooperation and coordination of Slovak institutions in cultural and other spheres, especially with EU member states. At an international level, the programs of Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus-

² The Follow-up Group acquires support from the European University Association, the European Association of Institution in Higher Education (EURASHE), European Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), the Council of Europe, the UNESCO European Center for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the Education International Pan-European Structure.

Mundus and Tempus are administered by SAAIC, which operates national offices for these programs specifically. The creation of a national Bologna support team to provide help to higher education institutions in their implementation of the Bologna process was suggested by the European Commission in 2004. The National Office of the Socrates/Erasmus programs was asked by the European Commission to support and administer the creation of a team and to present its projects before the Commission. In cooperation with the higher education section of the Ministry of Education, the Conference of Rectors and the Council of Higher Education Institutions, the National Office proposed the formation of a seven-member group of promoters (László 2008, 48-49). This national team provides help to higher education institutions regarding the implementation of the Bologna process in the following fields:

- quality assurance (full-time and part-time courses),
- forming a three-level education system,
- recognition of studies (ECTS, Diploma supplement),
- lifelong learning,
- creation of EHEA and a European research area,
- mobility in higher education,
- European dimensions in higher education (Sprievodca 2006, 23).

The legal basis for the implementation of the Bologna objectives in Slovakia were established in 2002. These regulations will be discussed in the following section of the article.

The Bologna process in Slovakia

The Bologna process proved to be a complex, multidimensional national and international process with a continuously expanding higher education policy agenda. Among the various participating agents there have emerged different interpretations of what the Bo-

logna process is. However, the most simple way to define the Bologna process is through its original objectives, called action lines: (1) the easily readable and comparable degrees, (2) the adoption of a system based on two main cycles, (3) the establishment of a system of credits, (4) the promotion of mobility, (5) the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance, (6) the promotion of the European dimension in higher education. In the next section of this article, which is structured according to these policy objectives, our attempt is to present some reflections on their implementation in Slovakia.

Comparable and transparent degrees

The aim of easily comparable and readable degrees is to facilitate the recognition of studies among participating states, to support the intra-European mobility of labour, and to improve the attractiveness of European higher education systems. In Slovakia the recognition of documents on qualifications and studies is controlled in a comprehensive way by Law No. 477/2002 Z.z. and its modified version of 2004. The adoption of the act was inspired – among others – by the Lisbon Convention, the Bologna process and the demands for legal harmonization arising from Slovakia's new EU-membership. According to the act professional qualification was defined at four levels: (1) a higher education degree (*vysokoškolský diplom*), (2) a graduate degree (*absolventský diplom*), (3) a certificate of studies (*vysvedčenie*), and (4) a certificate of professional competencies (*osvedčenie o odbornej spôsobilosti*). The act differentiates between certificates on the basis of the question why they need to be recognized. The reasons for recognition may relate to further studies, academic goals, or employment. Consequently, the certificates verifying earlier study programs can be the following: (1) a diploma (*diplom*), (2) a certificate upon final examination

(*vysvedčenie o štátnej skúške*), or (3) a diploma supplement (*dodatok k diplomu*) (Zákon 2008, § 68, [1]). One of the most important means of achieving the aim of easily comparable and readable degrees is the introduction of the Diploma Supplement. According to the 2002 Higher Education Act, the Diploma Supplement contains the details of the study program results, and the diploma and its supplement are issued by a higher education institution (Zákon 2008, § 68, [4]). The details concerning the content of the diploma supplement and its uniform European form are regulated by ministerial order, according to which an English version is provided on request. The introduction of the Diploma Supplement was a slow process: *“Most Slovak institutions in higher education have not yet introduced the issuing of the diploma supplement. In 2004 only two institutions issued diploma supplements on their own, another six on request, two of which issued them for a fee. Eleven institutions intend to issue diploma supplements within the time interval set by the law”* (Sprievodca 2006, 31)

In 2004 legal regulations were introduced for the recognition of qualifications, certificates, and diplomas obtained abroad. The ministerial order on the process of the recognition of study documents mentioned in the 2002 law came into being. This provided recognition of diplomas and qualifications with an exact legal frame and procedure in accordance with European norms (Vyhláška 2005). The initial contradictory interpretation of the law changed in 2006, when the problems caused by indecisive administration and the professional and technical implementation of study programs and diploma recognition were solved. In order for Slovak qualifications and higher education degrees to be recognized abroad, however, the issuing of bilingual and English versions of diplomas, supplements and certificates has been prescribed by law. Since 2009 each higher education institution has also issued its certificates in English (László 2008, 51).

The two-cycle degree structure

The definition of the bachelor's degree as a basic European diploma and the outlining of its function has started a continuing debate among experts, academics and decision makers. The challenge of introduction consisted of several aspects of policy demands: (1) to introduce uniform Bachelor programs, (2) that are finished in three years, (3) during which time they prepare the students both for the labour market and further studies, thus (4) ensuring practical professional as well as general academic knowledge and competencies. In the European higher education this has proved to be a real innovation. There have been several attempts to describe the abilities and competencies needed for a Bachelor's degree (Barakonyi 2003: 86). The second cycle of one- or two-year-long studies ends with the acquisition of a Master's degree based on 60 to 120 credits. Here students also have to be in possession of clearly defined competencies. Just as with Bachelors' degrees numerous attempts have been made to define Master's degrees' competencies (Barakonyi 2003, 87).

One objective of the Bologna process is that graduate students should be in the possession of such professional knowledge – and practical experiences – that can be directly used in the realm of work. The acquisition of further qualifications and specializations are determined by the ever-changing needs of the labour-market as well as by individual abilities and ambitions. Individual needs, academic considerations and the expectations of the labour-market have to be satisfied by the content profile of bachelor and master studies. The three-cycle system in Slovakia was introduced by the 131/2002 Higher Education Law (*Zákon* 2002). In accordance with this law, (§ 50, [3]) the Ministry of Education has developed standards for higher education programs and a schedule of implementation, which are as follows: the institutions develop their study programs (taking into account the central standards), which will then

be accredited. Having completed these courses, students can consequently obtain higher education degrees. Among the 364 courses of studies in Slovakia in 2010 there were 165 ones leading to first-level, 165 to second-level, and 316 to third-level higher education degrees. This division does not take the contracted second-, and third-level programs into consideration, although it would be permitted by present laws (§ 53, [3]). Beside this, there are 117 programs where students can conduct their studies at all three levels.

By the end of 2005, 2 254 non-teacher-training (first-, second-, or contracted-level), 4 516 teacher-training³ and 1 033 third-level study programs had been accredited⁴. The number of study programs nowadays has remained the same. The reason for this high number is that each study program is counted separately on the basis of the particular institutions (faculties), study forms (full-time [*denné*], part-time [*externé*]), the level of the respective diplomas, and the lengths of studies. This system of counting the number of programs was set by law. (Výročná správa, 2006). The different levels are prescribed by Law 131/2002, based on the following principles:

- In bachelors' programs the goal of studies is (1) to master theoretical and practical knowledge at the current level of sciences and the arts. A further objective of the programs is that (2) graduates should be able to apply this knowledge for work or for further studies by making use of their abilities (Zákon 2008, § 52 [1]).
- In the second-phase programs the goal of studies is (1) to master theoretical and practical knowledge at the current level of sciences and the arts. A further objective of the programs is that (2) graduates be able to apply this knowledge in a creative

³ The 364 courses of studies are grouped under 27 branches of sciences that are further aligned to nine sciences.

⁴ Higher education institutions may offer only accredited study programs.

manner by making use of their abilities for work or for doctorate programs (Zákon 2008, § 53 [1]).

- In third-level programs the goal of studies is to master practical knowledge on the current level of sciences and the arts. In these programs students are expected to contribute to the universal human knowledge-base with their own academic or artistic achievements based on independent academic research or creative activity in the field of sciences, technology or the arts (Zákon 2008, § 54, [1]).

Since the 2005/6 academic year the three-cycle program is compulsory in Slovakian higher education, but with special ministerial authorization can be run undivided, in long-cycle (old) Master programs lasting four to six years. (Zákon 2008, § 53, [3]). At the present the system of study fields allows such study programmes at three fields of medicine and pharmacy. On the basis of earlier laws (Zákon 1990) third- to sixth-year students taking part in programs accredited until 2003 can complete their studies with a second-level degree. The Bologna-type, new kind of accreditation of most teacher-training programs was carried out in 2005, whereas that of the non-teacher-training ones had been completed a year earlier. The accreditation of the completely new, three-level programs started in 2003. The first bachelor-level students graduated in the 2006/7 academic year (László 2008, 52).

Even if the implementation of cycle programs is at an advanced stage in Slovakia, several unresolved problems remain. Although the restructuring of the higher education system has been accepted by professional and civil society, it is not regarded as a means or possibility to conceive the Bachelor programs as mass higher education and the two subsequent levels as semi-elite or elite higher education. Other issues are arising from the comprehensive function (preparing for the labour market or further studies) of the new bachelors. As the experiences and higher education data show the

bachelor's level is simply regarded as a precondition for further studies. On the basis of monitoring outcomes it is clear that most students do not intend to end their studies with a bachelor's degree and be employed immediately, unless this is financially favourable. Furthermore, even those who seem willing to start working with a bachelor's degree express the wish to continue with their studies later, which can be explained by the trend that the transfer from higher education to work is no longer a single act. Indeed, those employed may enter higher education at several points of their life.

In fact, the issues of entering the second phase of studies and of continuous learning are not being debated at universities or in society. The present, head quota-based system of state financing does not encourage the selection of students according to their knowledge and abilities when entering their second phase of studies. Worse, nothing is known about the proportion of first- and second-phase students. (Although 2008 is the first year to see huge numbers of bachelor graduates, earlier years also witnessed the graduation of first-level students). Determining the conditions of entering master-level programs appears to be a complex issue; formerly, from the point of view of their professional content, first- and second-level study programs used to be developed in a coherent way, where the second phase was completely based on the first one. In addition, they were always based on one or, at most, two courses of studies. The main point is whether the course of study or the study program will serve as a precondition for entering the second phase and which bachelor's degrees will be accepted by universities. The two-subject system of teacher-training programs renders this issue even more complicated (László 2008, 53).

In the academic year 2007/8, the reorganisation of higher education in Slovakia reached its first testing. First students of bachelor programmes pursuing their studies completely according to the Bologna process graduated in 2008. There were 34,421 such graduates altogether in Slovakia that year, 20,481 having studied

full-time and 13,940 part-time (Výročná správa 2009,35). In 2008, 91.7 percent of students enrolled in second level studies were graduates of the same year (Výročná správa 2009, 46). One year later at 90.2 percent this rate had not changed significantly. In 2008, 95 percent of these full-time graduates continued their studies in a second-level training (Strhan 2009, 5).

The path-dependency of Slovakian higher education system and the preservation of old arrangements under the new structures is clearly visible: *„Insufficient knowledge obtained during first-level studies and low or non-acceptance of the BA academic title in the labour market were the most important reasons for the continuation of studies. This fact also proves that the higher education institutions did not create three-year Bachelor and two-year Master programmes, but they simply divided the five-year university studies into two separate periods. It is unthinkable that the requirements designated in the past for those 15-20 percent of most talented could be fulfilled by 50-70 percent of the population. Its most harmful result is a gradual but substantial decline.“* (Strhan 2009, 6-7).

Slovakia has missed the opportunity – offered by its uniform higher education system and the rapid change to the new structure – to reform its higher education in the spirit of the Bologna Declaration. Pre-eminently, we can speak about the content failure of the reform since it got stuck on the level of administrative measures. The higher education institutions were unable to break out of the shell of their inner traditions towards the creation of practical and market oriented first-level study programmes. The Accreditation Committee has also followed the easier way, evaluating the programmes according to formal requirements instead of examining their content from the point of view of practical demands. Public administration regulations have increasingly been defined by political advantages instead of directing reforms towards the content fulfilment of the Bologna objectives.

The introduction of the credit system

“The elaboration and introduction of a uniform credit-system aims at facilitating widespread student mobility and encouraging a more flexible system of study programs. It also assists students in finding suitable jobs in the European labour market as well as enhances the compatibility, attractiveness, and competitiveness of the European higher education” (Sprievodca 2006, 34). The introduction of ECTS has proved to be a big step forward within the Socrates/Erasmus programs. “*The ETCS is based on the amount of effort students put into their studies to reach their goals*” (Balla, 2005). The system was originally developed to facilitate students’ mobility by credit transfer. However, it has recently become a means of credit accumulation (*European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System*).

In Slovak higher education the origins of the introduction of the credit system date back to the early 1990s. A legal framework for its introduction was created by § 62 of the 2002 higher education law (Zákon, 2002). The details and the form of the system’s introduction were defined in the ministerial order 614/2002 (Vyhláška, 2002). According to this law credits are allocated to components of study programs and represent the effort students must make to pass the relevant exams. The standard workload of one student is expressed by 60 credits in an academic year, 30 credits in a semester and 20 credits in a trimester (Zákon 2008, § 62, [2]).

“*The actual state of the implementation of the credit system and the Diploma Supplement was examined by the Conference of Rectors in 2004. Based on their report, 88 percent (sixteen) of the public higher education institutions applied the system in the manner prescribed by the ministerial order*” (Sprievodca 2006, 35). The high level of implementation can be attributed to the fact that the introduction of the credit system was compulsory for program accreditations. In sum, we can state that the legal framework for the

implementation was created in time. A Euro-conform system of documents and other printed forms needed for the appropriate implementation of the system was elaborated in both Slovak and English in 2002 (László 2008, 54). Until the academic year 2007/2008 the credit system and the credit documentation was comprehensively implemented in the whole higher education system.

Supporting student mobility

The creation of the European Higher Education Area as we have shown has as its main objective the improvement of permeability of system, the transferability and readability of degrees in a European and international context. These objectives are supported by the implementation of two- or three-cycle degree structures and credit-based learning. These technical-structural aspects help the establishment of a more flexible and open higher education system, which according to policy visions will improve the international mobility of students and faculty staff. *“The model to be followed in this respect is the American one for instance, where mobility between the different institutions is far beyond natural. There are, however, a couple of special features of that model making the whole system of mobility work easily there. These features are the diversified nature of the higher education system in the States and the general practice of flexible mobility in the American society itself”* (Hrubos 2003, 59).

In Slovakia various community and other mobility programs exist, which support the internationalization of Slovakian higher education. The European mobility programs in Slovakia are administered by SAAIC. Further opportunities are offered by the bi- and multilateral intergovernmental treaties signed by the Ministry of Education and the exchange programs organized by the Fulbright Committee concerning SAIA- and USA-related programs.

Unfortunately, there is only a limited amount of scholarship base for bilateral mobility co-operation between Slovak and foreign universities. By 2005 every public Slovak institution in higher education took part in European mobility programs (Socrates/Erasmus) (in 1998 only eight of them did so). In the academic year 2005/2006, 1,165 Slovak students took part in scholarship programs abroad lasting an average 4.7 months; most (305) from the Comenius University in Bratislava. For purposes of comparison: The number of students on scholarships was 380 in 1998/1999 and 682 in 2003/2004.⁶ This number is growing but it has not yet reached the one percent of the total number of students in Slovak higher education. Several foreign students studied at Slovak institutions within the Erasmus program. In the academic year 2005/2006 a total of 544 foreign students pursued shorter or longer courses of studies (248 students more than in the previous year). The University of Economics in Bratislava had the largest number (102) of foreign students. The level of teacher mobility, however, is very low. In the academic year 2005/2006, 383 teachers lectured abroad and 221 foreign ones taught in Slovakia. With the help of the Erasmus program approximately 120 Slovak teachers take part in scholarship programs abroad for one or two weeks every year (László 2008, 54-55).

Over half of Slovak higher education institutions have participated in the *Central European Exchange Programs for University Students (CEEPUS)* through which 233 Slovak students pursued studies and 128 teachers worked abroad; 223 foreign students and teachers came to higher education institutions in Slovakia (Výročná správa 2006, 50-53).

⁶ Three to twelve-month studies in the framework of Erasmus subprograms were completed between 1998 and 2003 in Germany by 633, in France by 247, in Spain by 197, in Belgium by 180 and in Italy by respectively 168 Slovak university students. According to the faculties, students of economic, engineering, foreign language, philologic and medical sciences predominated (Filkornová, Gadušová 2004).

Supporting the Lisbon strategy, the Slovak government formed the International Fellowship Program for promoting the mobility of home, foreign and doctoral students, lecturers and researchers. In 2006 the program allocated 168 home fellowships and 133 travel supports; 31 foreign students and 51 foreign lecturers and researchers were also sponsored. A total of 2,116 students and 474 teachers took part in these exchange programs between 1999 and 2002 (Filkornová, Gadušová 2004, 5). For both, students and teachers, there was a huge discrepancy between the number of incoming and outgoing students, where the former was insignificant compared to the outgoing students. The explanation has to be found in the low amount of student grants, the limited financial potentials of institutions, the low level of language skills (in both, students and teachers), the lack of high quality of infrastructure and the mentoring system. We should add that the recognition of studies abroad in mother institutions is still facing several difficulties. Recognition is not automatic in most institutions and programs since they are introducing additional requirements for outgoing students; in some cases the students even have to repeat some parts or whole semesters. Joint programs are very rare, only a few Slovak universities offer programs in foreign languages. In addition, Slovak study programs are not very well promoted abroad, and the standards for student accommodation, school canteens and services in general are low (Filkornová, Gadušová 2004).

Students' and teachers' mobility showed annual fluctuation and no continuous increase until the beginning of the Bologna process in 2005. The significant increase observable after this year is partly due to the fact that Slovakia has been a member of the European Union since 2004. In the academic year 2008/2009, 2,020 students and 563 teachers from Slovakia participated in the Erasmus program. At the same time 820 foreign students were hosted by various Slovakian institutions. In 2009, 202 further students, teachers and researchers got grants from the National Fellowship Program.

It also sponsored visits of 90 foreign students and 121 teachers to Slovakia. (Výročná správa 2010, 51-52). The majority of these are part-time study mobility, rather than diploma mobility. Apart from the European mobility program, students completely pursuing their studies abroad are also worth mentioning, because their number has multiplied compared to previous years with regard to Slovakian students. In 2004, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary became members of the European Union simultaneously and introduced the Bologna system practically at the same time. Moreover, the prestigious and high-standard Czech and Hungarian universities are appealing to Slovak students and Hungarian youths living in Slovakia since there are no language barriers. Their dynamic increase is illustrated by the fact that 7,437 Slovak students studying at Czech universities represented 5.2 percent of the Slovak citizen students studying in Slovakia in 2003, while in 2009 this rate reached 10.7 percent (Výročná správa 2009). Apart from the high standards, the attraction of the universities in Hungary for the Hungarian students living in Slovakia may originate in language reasons. Contrary to the Czech situation, the changing number of these young adults is then influenced by different factors. In 1995, there were 373 full-time Hungarian students living in Slovakia studying at universities of Hungary, thus representing 10.8 percent of the full-time Hungarian students living in Slovakia and studying at Slovak universities. This rate grew rapidly, reaching 19.4 percent in 1998 and 35.2 percent by 2003, just before the Hungarian language university was established in Komárno, Slovakia. In 2009, probably due to the opportunities of Hungarian language university education, 1,943 Hungarian students living in Slovakia pursued their studies in Hungary, thus representing 30.6 percent according to the above mentioned rates (Gyorsjelentés 2010).

The assurance of quality

As the Bologna Declaration puts it, there is a need for European cooperation in the field of quality assurance, based on a system of comparable criteria and methods. Questions of quality, quality assurance, quality assessment and quality control have always been a sensitive issue of higher education debates, which explains the moderate tone of the Declaration. Nonetheless, the process did start then and the following conferences welcomed the opportunity for making huge steps forward in the field. Issues of quality, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness had been on the policy agenda long before the Bologna process due to the expansion of the higher education system, the questioning of traditional steering practices and financial problems. However, the Bologna process has created a new platform for these debates, and this renewal is observable in every signatory country. Moreover, the quality issue is the most important element which connects the Bologna and Lisbon Processes. Regarding the latter quality assurance and control have been conceived as essential regulating mechanisms in higher education. In addition, we should mention that in the design, consultation and implementation of the Bologna policies (two-cycle degree structure, curricular reforms, and credit system) the national accreditation agencies played a major role backing the government.

The European Commission has taken part in the creation of quality assurance policies. In 2004, it divided the quality assurance procedure in five stages in order to guarantee the mutual recognition of European systems. The five stages are as follows: (1) creating an internal mechanism for quality assurance; (2) developing common standards, guideline principles and procedures; (3) creating an European register for quality assurance and accreditation agencies; (4) providing higher education institutions with freedom of choice concerning registered quality assessment agencies; (5) the acceptance by EU Member States of the decisions made by these

agencies. The accreditation of higher education programs and institutions has been introduced in Czechoslovakia right after the political transformation of 1989/90 through the Act 172/1990. Accreditation concentrates on academic standards, which has been received harshly by critics due to its indifference towards different types and levels of study programs and institutions as well as social and labour market needs. In addition, the procedure is criticized due to its highly bureaucratic nature. During the accreditation process, institutions are examined rigorously to determine whether they provide study courses and programs of higher education standards. The graduates of an accredited institution will receive a higher education diploma and the opportunity of pursuing postgraduate studies (and of achieving the titles of lecturers or professors). The accreditation process is carried out by the Accreditation Board, a consultative body to the government. The rights of the Committee are regulated by law (Zákon 2008, § 81, § 82, § 83).

Until 1999, higher education faculties had been evaluated annually based on their own reports. This evaluation included three areas: research activities, educational activities and the qualification levels of employees and their research results. Based on this evaluation, faculties were assigned to one of four quality categories (Zákon 1990, § 17). After the 2002 higher education law was passed, evaluation became a part of a complex accreditation procedure carried out by the Accreditation Board. Prior to that, the evaluation process had been institutionally separated from the accreditation procedure. According to the law (Zákon 2008, § 84 [1]), the complex accreditation of higher education institutions is a process evaluating the conditions for education, research, development, the arts and many other activities. The Board judges the requests for accreditation of all study programs, and the requests of universities for the nomination of lecturers and professors (László 2008, 56).

The regulations on the Accreditation Board adopted by the Republic of Slovakia on 19 March 2003 defined a series of new and

complex criteria (Nariadenie 2003). The regulations are based on experiences from quality control, quality assurance and accreditation procedures and on recommendations by political and professional bodies and institutions having an interest in the implementation of the Bologna process. The complex process of accreditation appears to be novel for stakeholders in Slovakia and is regarded as a means of diversification of higher education institutions in both horizontal and vertical terms. (László 2008, 56.)

Apart from the process of accreditation, two other new initiatives concern higher education quality assurance in Slovakia. As a result of the official statement issued in Berlin, the Conference of Rectors in Slovakia and the government have come to an agreement on the form quality evaluation at higher education institutions should take on. According to the agreement, the financial sources for the assessment will be provided by the government. As stated by the quality evaluation project compiled by the Conference of Rectors, higher education institutions will have to undergo an international institutional process of evaluation developed and carried out by experts of the European University Association (EUA). Their methods and techniques would then be used with a principle of autonomous evaluation that is carried out independently, without any influence on the part of the government or the institutions themselves. The aim of the project is to create a national system of higher education institutions and support the formation of a “culture of quality”. The idea of an overall evaluation of the whole Slovak higher education system has also been suggested, thereby declaring its European dimensions (Čikesova 2005).

The strengthening of vertical differences in higher education (institutional and program rankings) and the (methodological) difficulties of measuring “quality” have become other important issues in Slovakian higher education debates. At the end of 2004, the civil organization of Academic Rank and Ranking Agency (ARRA) was formed on the model of research selectivity exercise, later

called research assessment exercise operating in the United Kingdom. This is the first independent institution in Slovakia that intends to provide the public with regular information on higher education standards by comparing institutions (László 2008, 57). Its goals are: (1) to develop a method for quality evaluation; (2) to compile a ranked list of institutions and faculties; and (3) to encourage a raising of standards and competition. This is achieved with the help of a clear, attainable list of criteria using publicly accessible data. Banks and mobile phone services' providers were among the sponsors of ARRA, and it was also assisted by the European Social Fund. The evaluation is based on selected indicators and criteria (Správa ARRA 2005). The academic community and other higher education agents harshly criticized the first report of ARRA published in 2005.

The agency's most important mistake was to publish a poorly elaborated report with various methodological shortcomings. For example, it failed to provide data for one-third of the criteria (only twenty-three out of thirty-four criteria were provided with data). The agency was also criticized for the exclusive use of the Web of Knowledge database in assessing publications and several criteria were questioned, as they can easily be positively manipulated even without quality improvement. There was also disagreement over the division of faculties into six disciplines. Many thought that the system of criteria, the method of evaluation, and the scoring favoured the universities in Bratislava, as most members of the agency's supervising council and professional council work or have worked at these institutions or were students there, compromising ARRA's independence. Although ARRA has specified its criteria, they could not win either the academic and civil society or the political public life over to their cause. To date, ARRA publishes its annual ranking evaluation report gaining short term publicity, however, with insignificant impact on higher education policies and institutions (László 2008, 57-58). The new government formed in

2010 wants to reach the goal of quality improvement by means of essential changes concerning the criteria of accreditation assessment and by developing a completely new system for higher education and research subsidy. To date, the quality improvement of higher education might be influenced mostly by state subsidies. The published methodology of the financial distributions for 2010 shows this tendency. However, all of this will not result in overall success unless the share of the budget invested in higher education exceeds one percent.

The European dimension of higher education

The European dimension of higher education consists of fostering student mobility, recognition of studies abroad, supporting inter-institutional cooperation in education (e.g. joint courses and programs) and research, and expanding the Europe-related content in the curriculum. The recommendations of the Prague and Berlin Conferences regarding the support for a European dimension of higher education are essentially concerned with two things. The national institutions of higher education were asked (1) to develop modules and courses with Europe-related contents on all educational levels and (2) to make mutual use of academic human resources and cultural traditions. To make higher education compatible with European standards, the institutions in Slovakia are also giving high priority to the mobility of students and teachers. However, legal regulations as well as accreditation mechanisms are currently hindering the launching of joint programs with partners from abroad and the issuing of double or joint diplomas. The expansion and development of student and teacher mobility is happening at a very slow pace, though important steps have also been taken.

Some universities are already inviting guest lecturers (from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland). Several have launched pro-

grams in or created faculties for European studies. On the whole, though, institutions are not energetically introducing programs or subjects in European studies (László 2008, 58). The 2007 amendment of the higher education law allows universities and colleges to create joint study programmes. One of their advantages is the share of guaranteeing study programmes. However, necessitating those laws according to which the students must spend an adequate part of their studies at a partner institution creates such an obstacle that the spreading of the practice of joint programmes is restrained. Neither home universities among one another, nor home universities together with foreign institutions have grasped the opportunity offered. Despite this situation, the accreditation committee has developed neither its system of criteria nor (together with the government) its system of stimulation (Zákon 2008, § 54a, [1]). To date (2011) the Faculty of Central European Studies of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra and some other faculties have tried to organize study programmes that reach beyond the state borders.

Conclusion

The Bologna process celebrated its tenth birthday on 19 June 2009. During these ten years, a significant change took place in European higher education. The present study has given a detailed examination of Slovakia's performance in this process. The one-level educational system, as well as the system of basic and higher studies and the system of credits have all provided a good basis for the realization of the goals of the Bologna process. Slovakia was among the first to pass a law that declared the introduction of the Bologna objectives as of 1 April 2002. An undoubted advantage is the speed with which Slovakia has adopted the Bologna system without major conflicts. Summing up, on the basis of its results in the field of putting the Bologna system into practice, Slovakia oc-

cupies a prominent place among the countries of the European Union. A ministerial conference was organized in Leuven and Louvain-La-Neuve on the 28 and 29 April 2009 to evaluate the ten years of the Bologna process. While much has been achieved in implementing the Bologna reforms, the reports also illustrate that the European Higher Education Area action lines are implemented to varying degrees. The objectives set by the Bologna Declaration and policies developed in the subsequent years are still valid today. To achieve them, the conference has set the priorities for the next decade. By declaring these priorities, the ministers of education have announced the European Higher Education Area on 11 and 12 March 2010 by means of the Budapest-Vienna Declaration.

For Slovakia, the accentuated priorities of the decade represent such a content change in higher education that students are provided with knowledge, skills and competences that are essential for success in the labour market, with access to lifelong learning and raising the subsidy of the higher education and research to the level common among the developed European countries. Slovakia has completed well the formal transformation to the Bologna process. Now it should realize the complete content reform of higher education and research to become a valuable full member of the European Higher Education Area.

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