

THE ROLE OF STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

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Introduction

We are now entering the last stage of the Bologna Process - implementation. We already know in details the goals of Bologna and the proposed solutions to be implemented as part of this Process. Implementation is being handled by governments as well as international and national organizations, including conferences of rectors or associations of universities, non-governmental organizations but also by the international and national student organizations. I have to underline in this context that the role of student organisations should be much stronger than before at this stage of Bologna Process, especially at the institutional level.

The coming years will be decisive because that is when the true extent of implementation of the new Bologna solutions relating to studies and students at higher education institutions should be achieved, and hence also at faculty level. Success at the faculty level will be fundamental for the success of the process as a whole.

We must not forget that we don't have only the keen supporters of the Bologna Process in higher education institutions. It often happens that politicians and rectors are highly supportive of the Process, but as we go down, closer to grassroots level, their dedication tends to diminish. I am not thinking about senate members, rather about faculty professors who in part might display a more conservative approach. The conclusion from this is that in many countries — Poland included — the final success in implementing the Bologna Process will depend not just on legislative solutions, but primarily on a stimulation, and even a pressure, if necessary, within faculties to achieve effective implementation of the Bologna principles. This pressure must be based on the powerful motivations which in their case must be based on specific benefits to be gained especially by students as the most interested group in this context in higher education institutions. The Bologna Process is first of all intended to serve students — it is the students who should be having more freedom and much greater possibilities of choice in the course of their studies. And this will be achieved by making the studies more flexible and divided up into cycles, by increasing student mobility and providing students with more opportunities for better jobs in European Union through increased readability and comparability of their diplomas.

To make it possible, the Bologna Process must be granted strong support — organizational, program-related and financial — both on government and higher education

system levels, and in the higher education institutions themselves. As a rule, the academic staff are not additionally remunerated for the additional effort they must put in to implement Bologna. Of course the professors and teaching staff may be expected to do the extra work motivated by academic ethos. But! But if this effort is to be intensified, the students must demonstrate clear interest and anticipation. And sometimes students must start applying a kind of stimulating pressure on the faculty members to intensify their work. (To keep the credibility also, the students themselves should be playing an active role in the implementation initiatives).

The students will not be effective if they form an atomised and poorly organized body. An alternative to this unwelcomed situation are well organized student self-governments, well rooted in their respective student communities, and also other student organizations operating in the higher education institutions and in their environments. Let me present now a few sentences chosen by me from some documents.

European Documents on the Role of Students

The Communiqué issued by education ministers, meeting in Prague in 2001, stressed the importance of student involvement:

... Ministers affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions. Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process...

The ministers' communiqué issued in 2003 in Berlin speaks of:

... the constructive participation of student organisations in the Bologna Process and ... the necessity to include the students continuously and at an early stage in further activities...

This document goes on to say:

... Students are full partners in higher education governance. Ministers note that national legal measures for ensuring student participation are largely in place throughout the European Higher Education Area. They also call on institutions and student organisations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance...

In their next communiqué, issued in 2005 in Bergen, the ministers announced the following:

... We underline the central role of higher education institutions, their staff and students as partners in the Bologna Process. Their role in the implementation of the Process becomes all the more important now that the necessary legislative reforms are largely in place, and we encourage them to continue and intensify their efforts to establish the EHEA...

In its turn, the Council of Europe, Higher Education and Research Division, in its 2005 document titled “Higher Education Governance Between Democratic Culture, Academic Aspirations and Market Forces. Considerations and Recommendations” lists among others the following two objectives for higher education systems:

- ... • preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society,*
- personal development...*

It is hard to imagine the pursuit of all those goals without the involvement of student organizations operating in higher education institutions. To give you an example: personal development of students is faster and more comprehensive if they are exposed to interpersonal contacts within organized groups of people sharing the same aspiration to their further cultural development. That means, students should be cooperating in diverse projects that would shape their characters and develop their personalities. All of these and the other forms of student activity require some organisational infrastructure.

And this is what defines the Roles, Tasks and Opportunities of Student Organizations

The most important and having the best position among student organizations is the student self-government. It is an organization being politically uninvolved, legally required to serve the entire student community at a given higher education institution. I believe the student self-government as such should be defined by an act of law. As an example we can take the Act on Higher Education being in force in Poland today, which makes the student self-government organs the representatives of the student body as a whole. These organs appoint their representatives to work in collective bodies of the given higher education institution, first of all in the senate. This Act requires at least 20% of seats in the senate to be reserved for students, including third-cycle doctoral students. Student members of the senate enjoy the same rights and have the same power as representatives of the professors community. As a result, the students, represented by their delegates to the senate, may influence all decisions pertaining to their higher education institution, including also decisions with regard to their professors. And we believe this is the way it should be.

We cannot restrict student responsibilities and rights to what is traditionally being classified as student matters, including, for example, social assistance issues. We believe, the current placement of students in the governance system of higher education institutions means that the role of student self-governments in the academic self-government as a whole, is not to be marginal, merely decorative or supplementary. Definitely not, this role is truly constitutive.

As we can see from the foregoing, students should be given a share of governance powers at both the higher education institution and faculty levels. They can, and indeed they should be making use of their powers to promote or enforce solutions they see as beneficial for them. It goes without saying that the issue which is most important for students at this point is the implementation of the Bologna Process at their respective higher education institutions. What does this entail in practice? For lack of time, I will mention just a few of the exemplary actions students should be taking.

First example:

Students should demand that proper program structures to be developed for first- and second-cycle studies, especially when they are being offered only as integrated master's studies, is some countries in continental Europe much preferred by the academic staff. Among other things, efforts must be made to prevent the replacement of the five-year integrated master's studies with a two-cycles system of studies, required by the Bologna Process, from becoming merely a formal exercise, avoiding significant changes in the program structure and doing without recruitment requirements for enrolment to second-cycle studies.

Second example:

Students should be stimulating their deans to conclude agreements with other higher education institutions allowing them to spend a semester or a year studying abroad. Guest-student programs of this kind require flexible study rules, the right to freely choose subjects to study, and the proper implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). No less important in this context are efforts to provide adequate conditions for foreign guest-students to study at the given higher education institution such as foreign language courses of appropriate quality, accommodation and also promotion and information campaigns, etc.

Third example:

Student self-governments should demand that their higher education institutions earmark sufficient sums in their activity-and-finance plans for a scholarship fund. Money from this fund should be used to provide financial assistance to students taking part in European student exchange programs.

And the last example:

Students should stimulate and demand the development of study programs and adoption of regulations that would create real possibilities for graduates of first-cycle studies to go on to second-cycle studies in a different but related field of study. This would provide students with an education of a more interdisciplinary character.

In Poland, student self-governments are represented on the national level by so called the Parliament of Students of the Republic of Poland. As I said before this body is sanctioned by the Act on Higher Education. The Parliament of Students by law receives financial assistance from the minister, who is fully obliged to do it, as the legal representation of the entire student community in the country is fully guaranteed. In virtue of the Act on Higher Education, the Parliament of students has the right to voice opinions and present proposals in matters relating to the entire student community, including the right to be consulted on legislation concerning students. The minister is required to seek the opinion of the student Parliament on draft legislation of this kind. This means that students can do a lot to influence the implementation of the Bologna Process in line with their own views and preferences, especially when it comes to legal regulations and ordinances issued by the minister responsible for education. Moreover, the students' Parliament is not acting alone in Poland. It works hand in hand with the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland which is the national rectors conference and which in its turn is being supported by the Polish Rectors Foundation. It is non-governmental organization and leading think tank established by more than one hundred rectors, intended as an independent research and stimulating body providing expertise in the fields of higher education and scientific research. Parliament of Students is also our important institutional partner.

Let me go to the Conclusions and Final Remarks

1. The student self-government, an organization that is by definition representative of the entire student community, should be playing a key role in promoting the Bologna Process, both in the student community and in organs of the higher education institution. However, we must not overlook other organizations, such as scientific, artistic, tourist, sports and other associations created by students at the various higher education institutions. Many of these associations find partners abroad, thus developing the cultural infrastructure of mutual contacts, exchange and cooperation among European higher education institutions. The Bologna spirit goes a long way towards encouraging initiatives of this kind.

2. The effectiveness of efforts of students organisations will be much enhanced if they are properly planned and consistent, if they work together with the rector and deans on institutional level, and with the conference of rectors on the national level. In Poland we see this kind of partnership between students and rectors as the most important element of Bologna implementation efforts.