

Albanian Higher Education Strategy

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Abstract

Since its inception, the governments of 29 European countries (member states of the Bologna Declaration in 1999) had as their main target the creation of a common and coherent system of Higher Education Area in Europe (EHEA). The main intention for the creation of a ‘European Education Area’ was the fostering of student mobility and employability in order to strengthen competition and to make the European Higher Education more attractive.

The main focus of this paper is the analysis of the National Periodic Reports for the period 2004-2009, the Albanian National Strategy for Higher Education 2014-2020, and a study on the presence of Quality Assurance Institutions in Higher Education, based on the report from the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.

The methodology chosen by the authors of this paper is to divide into four groups the countries that have established a national or private Quality Assurance Institution as part of their higher education system in order to assess whether the existence/presence of such institutions act as key instruments to ensuring the quality of higher education.

It is recommended that Albania even though listed in the group of countries establishing a National Quality Assurance Agency, can ‘maybe’ follow the model of those European countries that have established a further Private Quality Assurance Agency in addition to the National Quality Assurance Agency. It is believed that the further establishment of a carefully chosen private quality assurance agency (ENQA or EQAR) would ensure quality and guarantee transparency in higher education.

Keywords: Bologna Process; Albanian Higher Education National Strategy; Higher Education Area in Europe (EHEA); Social dimension; Quality Assurance (QA) Institutions

Introduction

Since its inception, the governments of 29 European countries (member states of the Bologna Declaration in 1999) had as their main target the creation of a common and coherent system of Higher Education Area in Europe (EHEA). The main intention for the creation of a 'European Education Area' was the fostering of student mobility and employability in order to strengthen competition and to make the European Higher Education more attractive.

The cooperation in European Higher Education began and continues as a voluntary process by the participating countries (47 countries). The provisions of the Bologna Declaration are not considered clauses of a binding contract for the 47 signatory countries as of 2010. Instead, these provisions are a set of voluntary measures with the aim of harmonising the higher education process known as 'the Bologna Process'. The Bologna Process was established to further develop cooperation in European Higher Education.

The main objective of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 was to foster student mobility¹ and employability. This would be accomplished through the establishment of undergraduate and postgraduate studies providing easy access to students of all ages. These studies had to provide coherent programmes and degrees; supervised through a quality assurance process. The objectives gradually expanded in 2001 to include lifelong learning², the social dimension³, and the involvement of students as active partners.

Subsequent ministerial meetings broadened these objectives even further through the Prague Communiqué 2001 and Berlin Communiqué 2003. These ministerial meetings serve as a driving force for setting priorities every two years. The following elements were emphasised to be followed up as part of the Bologna process namely: a three-cycle system was introduced for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees; together with the 'recognition of qualifications'⁴ and the concept of 'social dimension'⁵. In addition, since 2001 the need was emphasised for the independence and autonomy of all Higher Education Institutions.

In 2003, the Berlin Communiqué established follow-up structures through the creation of the Bologna Follow-up Group and National Follow-up Groups to report on the Bologna Process implementation. The national follow up groups have been

¹ The Sorbonne Declaration in 1998, Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system, by the four Ministers in charge for France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, Paris, the Sorbonne, May 25 1998

² Prague Communiqué in 2001 and Berlin Communiqué 2003 "Realising the European Higher Education Area", Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

directed to prepare a work plan on the Bologna process implementation at national and institutional level.

Albania became signatory to the Bologna Declaration during the Berlin Conference in 2003. The Bologna Declaration is considered for Albania and its national institutions an important instrument implementing good practices in Higher Education at national level. The Ministry of Education and Science of Albania, the responsible institution in this field, voluntarily commenced the implementation of the major instruments of the Bologna Declaration. Albania's main aim was to integrate the Albanian Higher Education system into the European system. For many of the Bologna Declaration signatory states such as Albania (2003), its' main instruments have been earlier approached by the Universities (based on the Ministerial Decree No. 164 dated 19.06.2001). This approach was more related to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The implementation of the Bologna Declaration for Albania aimed: organization of university curricula of credits (ECTS); teaching workload; and standards of the Quality Assurance (QA) system.

The signatory countries must ensure that they keep pace with the ambition to establish a European Higher Education Area. It is through the Bologna Process and its member the European Commission that guarantees the observation and implementation of its objectives by the signatory countries. There has been significant progress from all 46 signatory countries in the realisation of this European ambition. As signatory state, Albania, has prepared national periodic reports on a step by step basis laying down the foundations for the establishment of the European Higher Education Area.

The main focus of this paper is the analysis of the National Periodic Reports for the period 2004-2009, the Albanian National Strategies for Higher Education 2008-2013 and 2014-2020, and a study on the presence of Quality Assurance Institutions in Higher Education, based on the report from the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.

National Periodical Reports

This section summaries the content of the reports prepared by Ministry of Higher Education during the period 2004-2009. These reports became the object of analysis with the objective of highlighting the performed work of the relevant institutions in the implementation of the 'Bologna Process', as well as, the first steps taken for its completion.

National Periodical Report 2004-2005

Signatory countries are obliged to report back to the Bologna Follow-up Groups on the implementation steps taken by their respective countries every two years. Albania has started its first national periodical reports in 2004 for the period 2004-2005.

The first Albanian national periodical report 2004-2005 was based on the Berlin Communiqué 2003. This Communiqué requested signatory states to provide information on the steps taken to implement the Bologna Declaration and the priorities set for the period 2003-2005: development of quality assurance; implementation of the two-cycle system; recognition of degrees and periods of studies; third cycle at doctoral level; and the promotion of the European Social Dimension.

The Albanian reports drafted by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Science address these issues by providing an explanation of the implementation stage following the Bologna Process. Furthermore, the 2004-2005 report provided a description of the Higher Education structure of all public authorities/agencies/bodies. The public authorities responsible for monitoring and evaluating Higher Education institutions in Albania are the: Department of Higher Education and Diploma Recognition; Agency of Accreditation of Higher Education (established in 1999); Committee for Scientific Qualification.

- The first issue addressed was that of *'Quality Assurance'*. The Bologna Process required the setting up of a National System of Quality Assurance. The agency responsible for handling issues of quality assurance is now the Albanian Agency of Accreditation. This public institution is in charge of compiling a set of standards and procedures on the internal and external evaluation for universities. Albania has so far set up an internal procedure for evaluating quality assurance in higher education institutions through the use of internal experts with the necessary expertise in the field. Since 2004, the Bologna follow-up group recommends the involvement of foreign experts into the accreditation process. It was only in 2012 that foreign experts have officially taken part in the evaluation and accreditation process.
- The next issue addressed the *'Two Cycle'* system. As of July 2002, Albania re-organised its university studies in the form of the two-cycle degree ('3+2') in compliance with the Prague Communiqué. As of 2003, this system was implemented to the following universities: Agricultural University and Polytechnic University. In response to the priority imposed on signatory countries to recognise degrees and periods of study, Albania has adopted the following legal and sublegal actions: the law on Higher Education (No.8461, dated 25.02.1999); the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention; decision of Council of Ministers; regulation from the Minister of Education and Science,

and the effective adoption of the diploma supplement⁶. In addition, the three cycle system of studies was successfully implemented through the setting up of Doctoral studies via research.

- Furthermore, one of the main objectives of the Bologna Declaration is the *mobility* of students and staff. The promotion of student and staff mobility has since been a priority for the Albanian public institutions. Albania has established the necessary legal framework to transfer studies within and outside the Albanian education system. The transfer of studies could only be achieved through the adjustment of curricula at the international level; promoting academic staff qualification, and through the adoption of legal frameworks in compliance with the 'Bologna Declaration'. Through different projections and training programs, Albanian academic staff has received the necessary training and assistance in obtaining further qualifications. In the framework of creating chances for students and teaching staff mobility the agreement between Albania and other European countries have been realised for both students and professors through a number of training programs such as: CEEPUS, ERASMUS MUNDUS, TEMPUS. These programs have played a major role in the training and qualification of teaching staff.⁷ The difficulty with these projects is that they are difficult to be realized financially. Nowadays, training has become scarce due to lack of financial resources for sending academic staff abroad to be qualified.
- The concept of the *social dimension* has been at the center of many important policy documents at international level. They all assert that the social dimension of higher education is primarily concerned with providing opportunities for all members of a society to participate in higher education. Although the "social dimension of higher education" has become a major topic of Albania Higher Education strategy, the broad and wide-ranging nature of the concept means that policies to address social dimension objectives are difficult to be identified and compare to that at European level. The social dimension of higher education presents the challenge to European cooperation as it understood so differently from country to another.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defined equitable tertiary education systems as: "... those that ensure that access to, participation in and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals 'innate ability and study effort. They ensure that the achievement of education potential at tertiary level is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including of factors such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age, or disability"⁸; "the student body

⁶ National Periodical Report, 2004-2005, pp 5-6.

⁷ National Periodical Report, 2004-2005, p 19.

⁸ OECD, 2008, p. 14

entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations” [and emphasizes the] “importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background”⁹.

Albania has adopted a series of legal and financial measures which have had an impact on the social dimension as set out in the Bologna Declaration. Albania’s reaction towards these complex issues have concentrated through reforming the curricula, opening up new university courses, and establishing the part time system. Every person is given the opportunity to benefit from these reforms. There has been no discrimination on the basis of age, gender, religion, ethnicity, and so on. The outmost objective is to prepare students to stand up to challenges in the market economy. Another important development in promoting the ‘social dimension’ has been the granting of scholarships. Students studying in a public university are awarded scholarships under the two schemes: economic (for low income families) and motivational support (for excellent results). Also, special scholarships are awarded to students in difficulties either economically or socially.

- Higher education in Albania is open to any one that is interested in *lifelong learning*. Any person with a particular skill to the market economy needs may continue to gain further qualifications. The law of Higher Education no.8461, dated 25.02.1999 has given the possibility to all persons at any given age to pursue their studies by taking a second major or follow the part-time system of study. In support of this, public universities allow any person to apply for a second degree in their choice of study without any competition. A process of ‘admission quotas’ is followed. Developments in lifelong learning consisted for the first time in Albania the application of “Education in distance” in the Polytechnic University of Tirana.¹⁰ The part-time and distance learning system contributes to the social dimension for specific courses. In addition, once the diplomas have been issued upon completion of studies, the actual diploma does not reflect whether the study has been taken in the part time or full time system.
- The Albanian support and contribution to the *European dimension in higher education* is noticed through the development of joint degrees with other European Higher Education institutions. Public and Private universities have applied common program of studies (joint degrees) at the university level. Three Public universities have implemented Master studies in their programs: the Tirana University for: “Master European studies”, and “Master in Economic studies”;

⁹ London Communiqué 2007, p 5.

¹⁰ National Periodical Report, 2004-2005, p 19

the Polytechnic University of Tirana for: “Master in Enterprise management”; Agricultural University of Tirana for: “Master in Veterinary Medicine”.¹¹

Private universities are University of New York in Tirana and the Catholic University “Zonja e Keshillit te Mire”, providing joint degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate level in collaboration with United States of America and Italian Universities respectively.

Albanian Universities have been encouraged to cooperate and share best practices with other foreign universities. Such cooperation’s have assisted in better qualification of academic staff; introducing best practices on drafting new curricula. The Albanian universities have worked towards drafting same curricula for the same courses amongst regional universities in Albania to allow recognition and easy access by other Albanian universities. Further development includes the establishment and effective functioning of cross-university post-graduate schools within Albania, as well as, in other foreign universities through the inclusion of the Albanian Universities in the European cross-university network¹².

These collaborations increase the standards in teaching curriculum, teaching programs, evaluation procedures, academic and student mobility. The amended curriculum includes more themes on the European Union integration, labour market, and literature. The development of European dimension is also seen through the learning of foreign languages at university level such as English, French, Italian and Greek.

The following supplementary documents were introduced to the higher education system to achieve the effective implementation of the programs: Recommendation on the Criteria and Procedures for Recognition (2001); Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (2004); Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (2001).

National Periodical Report 2005-2007

This report was based on the Bergen Ministerial meeting held in 2005 focusing on the following priorities: reinforcing the social dimension; implementing the standards for quality assurance; developing national frameworks of qualifications in line with the European Higher Education Area.

The content of this report related to the main achievements of national institutions and partners:

¹¹ National Periodical Report 2004-2005, p 10; National Periodical Report, 2005-2007, p 17; National Periodical Report, 2007-2009, p 29.

¹² Secretary for Higher Education; (2003), Chair of the Bologna Follow-up Group no. 2313 protocol, The official written request by Ministry of Education and Science to the Mr. Dionyssi Kladis, Tirana, on 16.04.2003, p 2

- The establishment of the internal and external Quality Assurance System for public and private universities (students are included in all aspects of quality assurance) through the Agency of Accreditation and the Council of Accreditation.
- Further development of curricula in public and private universities for the three cycles of studies following the scheme 3+2+3,4+1+3 or 3+1 leading in Bachelor, Master and PhD degrees;
- The social dimension in the Higher Education related to: economical support for the students in difficulty.
- The democratic elections of governing bodies of the Higher Education Institutions and Student Governance Bodies in the decision-making process.
- The application/implementation of the new degree system based in the ECTS commencing in the academic year 2006-2007.
- The completion of the three cycle of study based on the National Qualification Framework (NQF). NQF is based upon a European model (official from 2010). The first cycle of study, finalized with an "Ordinary Bachelor" diploma with at least 180 ECTS; the second cycle of study, finalized with a "Master" diploma with at least 120 ECTS for "Master of Science" or with at least 60 ECTS for "Professional Master"; the third cycle of study (obtaining at least 300 ECTS) leading to a PhD which is at the same time a scientific degree; the highest level of a diploma university.
- The establishment and recognition of joint degrees¹³ and provision for students' access.
- Universities enjoy academic freedom in the teaching and scientific process (*institutional autonomy*). The academic freedom is concerned with respecting and honouring opinions, ideas, and methods and in guaranteeing freedom, creating thinking in teaching and research, in compliance with the relevant plans and programs. Public universities choose their own governing body, and the academic personnel define their own area of teaching. Students can create their own student governing body which is a non-public representation structure. They also participate in the election of the leading bodies of higher schools.

National Periodical Reports 2007-2009

This report was based on the London Communiqué in 2007. Its' content was related to the main legislative reforms in Higher Education; approval of the new Law on Higher Education no.9741 dated 21.05.2007; approval of the National Strategy on Higher Education from 2008 up to 2013. Upon commencing the academic year 2008 -2009 all Albanian universities have adopted the new scheme of studies according to Bologna Process.

¹³ National periodical reports 2007-2009, p 17

During this period several working groups on implementation of the Bologna Process were established. These groups include representatives of: Ministry of Education and Science; academic staff; students; and the National Quality Assurance Agency. At the time this report was drafted it was noticed that the following representatives were not included as being part of the working groups: Rectors' Conference; and Staff Trade Unions.

A further development included the national promoters' group created for supporting and advising the Higher Education Institutions on the implementation of the Bologna Process. These groups consisted representatives: Ministry of Education and Science; Rectors' Conference; academic staff; students; Staff Trade Unions; National Quality Assurance Agency; Employers Organisations¹⁴. Detailed quantitative description of the three cycles of studies¹⁵; access and admission between the first, second and third cycles¹⁶ were laid out in this national report.

In addition, the report addressed the issue of employability of graduates and cooperation with employers. It was concluded that the dialogue process between higher education institutions and employers on curriculum design, work placements and procedures were not completely defined¹⁷. Furthermore, the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and later Supplementary Documents were implemented. The principles most respected were: applicants 'right to fair assessment; recognition of Joint Degrees; information about higher education programs. It is worth mentioning that students graduating in 2009 have received the Diploma Supplement.

Albanian Higher Education Strategy (2014-2020)

This article will not discuss in detail the Draft Strategy of the Albanian Higher Education for the period 2014-2020. Instead, the focus will be on the following chapters: 'The Vision, Policies and its Objectives in Chapter II and Policy Objectives and its main benefits in Chapter III'.

Chapter II headed 'Vision, policies and its objectives' emphasises: the consolidation of quality assurance in accordance with the standard requirements of the Bologna process in the European Higher Education Area and in particular to that of the 'European Strategy 2020'. As one of the priorities of this Draft Strategy is quoted the 'profiling and differentiation of the Higher Education Institutions, with the aim of increasing the responsibility and accountability to the demands of the market on the

¹⁴ National periodical reports 2007-2009, pp 4-5

¹⁵ Ibid, p 6

¹⁶ Ibid, pp 8-9

¹⁷ Ibid, p 11

one hand and the adaptation needs of the regional and national development process towards the complete integration of the system.

Chapter III headed 'Policy Objectives and Main Benefits' inter alia are emphasised the following priorities: the quality assurance in Higher Education, the differentiation and the profilisation of the university offers. The first priority is projected to be achieved through: the improvement of the legal framework of the external evaluation and the realisation of the Institutional Accreditation process of Public Universities by 2020; ensuring instruments of transparency amongst public and private universities. The second priority is understood as: the differentiation of study programs by creating specific profiles in the system, in line with the market demands; the concentration of Universities for vocational education outside of Tirana ; the establishment and development of specific structures as 'Regional Development Centers', which would assist in the formulation of market demands in their respective region.

Quality Assurance Institutions in Higher Education

The impact of the Bologna process has been in the focus of the developed reports by the Eurydice Network and the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG). The report published by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency¹⁸ "Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010" provides a clear, comparative view of how higher education reform and development has been addressed at national level. The main issue of the report is to provide clear information on key aspects of higher education systems in all 46 countries of the emerging European Higher Education Area. Focusing on the impact of Bologna process reforms and taking account of significant contextual factors we may analyse the Albanian national policies and how legislation, regulations and recommendations are implemented.

The overview of the Bologna process by the National Higher Education system focuses on the institutions that insure the quality of higher education as: 1. Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA); 2. Name of Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR); and 3. National Quality Assurance Agency.

Albania is included in the list of 46 countries which has established within its higher education system the National Quality Assurance Agency. In our country, there is no other private agency operating in the field similar to the agencies set out by the Bologna Process, namely: Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education /ENQA & Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Quality Assurance Register/EQAR.

¹⁸ Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA P9 Eurydice), (2010) "Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010: The impact of the Bologna Process"; available at: eurydice.org

The methodology chosen by the author of this paper is to divide into four groups the countries that have established a national or private Quality Assurance Institution as part of their higher education system in order to assess whether the existence/presence of such institutions act as key instruments to ensuring the quality of higher education.

Group 1: Countries having no institutions established within their higher education system:

- Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium (German-speaking community), Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Malta.

Group 2: Countries including only one of the above mentioned institutions, namely:

- *a National Quality Assurance Agency:* Albania, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Georgia, Croatia, Italy, Moldova, Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Russia, Slovenia, Turkey and Ukraine.

Group 3: Countries including two of the above mentioned institutions, namely:

- *a National Quality Assurance Agency and a Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA):* Cyprus, Denmark, Italy, Russia, Turkey.

Group 4: Countries establishing at least one of the above private institutions:

- *a Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and or Name of Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR):*

Austria (ENQA & EQAR); Bosnia and Herzegovina (ENQA); Belgium – French-speaking community (ENQA); Belgium – Flemish-speaking community (ENQA & EQAR); Bulgaria (ENQA & EQAR); Switzerland (ENQA); Czech republic (ENQA); Germany (ENQA & EQAR); Estonia (ENQA); Spain (ENQA & EQAR); Finland (ENQA); France (ENQA); Hungary (ENQA); Ireland (ENQA & EQAR); Lithuania (ENQA); Luxembourg (EQAR); Latvia (ENQA); Netherland (ENQA & EQAR); Norway (EQAR); Rumania (ENQA & EQAR); Sweden (EQAR); Slovakia (ENQA); and The United Kingdom (ENQA).

Can we conclude based on this information that the presence of various public and private quality assurance institutions would strengthen and further improve the higher education system?

Based on these findings (for all 46 countries) we cannot reach the conclusion that in those countries where there is no presence of the quality assurance institutions the higher education system does not guarantee 'quality'. This can be proved by observing

the quality of the higher education system in the following developed countries (group one) which have not established any of the above mentioned institutions, such as in Belgium (German-speaking community), Iceland, and Liechtenstein. Thus, we cannot reach the conclusion that in those countries that does not exist a quality assurance agency there is a lack of quality in Higher Education.

Does the absence of a National Quality Assurance Agency ensure or guarantee quality?

Referring back to “Group Four” Austria, Belgium (French-speaking community), Belgium (Flemish-speaking community), Switzerland, Germany, France, an United Kingdom we cannot conclude that the absence of a National Quality Assurance Agency affects or ensures the quality within the higher education system.

Conclusion

Overall, the implementation of the Bologna Declaration intended to reform the structure of curricula system; creating a system of assessing and evaluating quality and accreditation; the financial reform of university management.

The actions of the Working Group on the social dimension by the 2007 consisted: measures to promote equal opportunities for access to higher education, participation and completion of studies; creating a study environment that enhances the quality of the student experience; provision of social services; student participation in the governance and organization of higher education.

In September 2008 the Albanian Government approved the National Strategy on Higher Education over the years 2008-2013, subsequently National Strategy on Higher Education 2014-2020. The national strategy is based upon the suggestions of the Working Groups.

Future challenges for Albanian Higher Education within 2010 are: institutional autonomy and good governance of Higher Education Institutions; the curricula reformation in accordance with NQF; assuring quality assurance and a fair accreditation system as a guarantee to the service render to the society; integration of the teaching process via scientific research; preparing the conditions for lifelong learning; increasing student mobility and participation; providing the higher education system a better dimension.

Albania has established the National Quality Assurance Agency. In our country, there is no other private agency operating in the field similar to the agencies set out by the Bologna Process, namely: Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education/ENQA & Quality Assurance Agency membership of the European Quality Assurance Register/EQAR.

The establishment of Quality Assurance Agencies are necessary instruments ensuring quality in Higher Education. It is recommended, that Albania even though listed in the group of countries establishing a National Quality Assurance Agency, can 'maybe' follow the model of those European countries listed in Group 3 that have established a Private Quality Assurance Agency in addition to the National Quality Assurance Agency. It is believed that the further establishment of a carefully chosen private quality assurance agencies (ENQA or EQAR) would ensure the quality and guarantee transparency in higher education.

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