

# IMPLEMENTATION OF BOLOGNA PROCESS AT THE SS. CYRIL AND METHODIUS UNIVERSITY IN SKOPJE: A VIEW FROM INSIDE

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**Abstract.** This paper deals with the description of the reforms in higher education in the Republic of Macedonia, made in the last decade. More precisely, the aim of this study is to discuss the implementation of Bologna principles in Ss. Cyril and Methodius University by comparing the reports from both the internal and the external evaluations in two follow-up periods (between 2002/03 and 2005/06, and between 2006/07 and 2009/10). Several official documents are analyzed for this purpose. The results show that the European credit transfer system (ECTS) in first and second cycle of studies is applied in every member of the University and a number of positive changes have been made in all areas of its activity. However, some expected difficulties and weaknesses are pointed out, due to the objective economic situation in the Republic of Macedonia or to the subjective understanding of "Bologna philosophy". Apart from official reports, a view from inside can bring on surface additional examples of ECTS misinterpretation and illusion of progress. To avoid the catch of distorted Bologna, it is suggested all participants in this process to take seriously recommendation for improvement given by European University Association.

**Keyword:** Bologna Process, ECTS, implementation, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Republic of Macedonia

## 1. Introduction

In 2000 the Republic of Macedonia started the process of changes in higher education system, when Ministry of Education and Science passed the new Law giving greater autonomy to higher education institutions. According to it, universities were obligated to reform curricula following the principles of the Bologna Declaration. On 19<sup>th</sup> September 2003, the Republic of Macedonia became a member of the European family of countries committed to implement the

recommendations of Bologna. The same year the Bologna Follow-up Group was established with representatives from the universities, Ministry of Education and Science and student organizations. This group, with collaboration of domestic and foreign experts, prepared the legal framework for Bologna principles implementation. Starting at 2002/03 and up to 2005, most of the faculties in Republic of Macedonia have decided to implement ECTS. In 2008 the Ministry of Education and Science prepared and passed new updates of the Law on Higher Education. Priority areas for legal intervention were: the degree structure, enhancement of the university-faculty relation promoting an integrated university, establishment of joint degrees, enhancement of life-long learning, increased student involvement and establishment of a legal basis for national loans and grants.[12]

The Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje (Hereafter named University or abbreviated UKIM) is the oldest state university in the Republic of Macedonia, founded in 1949, initially with three faculties: the Faculty of Philosophy, the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry. At the moment, the University represents a functional community of twenty-three faculties from all scientific fields: natural sciences, technical and technological sciences, medical sciences, biotechnical sciences, social sciences, humanities and arts. Also, UKIM comprises 5 research institutes and 11 joining member institutions. Its operations are regulated by the Higher Education Act and the Statute of the University. The most

important legal document of the University is the Statute, which is approved by the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia.

The process of change at UKIM began some time before the adoption of the Higher Education Act in 2000.[9] It was the first university in Republic of Macedonia who started the Bologna reform and implementation of ECTS in academic year 2002/03. In 2003 the University requested an institutional evaluation by the European University Association (EUA) [2]. The initial evaluation was made by an expert team and a set of recommendations were offered, concerning structural reorganization, internal quality assurance development, teaching and learning, research and finance.

Considering the guidelines from the External Evaluation Report, UKIM initiated reorganization procedures in order to achieve the European norms and standards in all spheres of its activities. Due to the fact that UKIM is a large university, the priority of reforming it into an integrated university with centralized management and administration was slow and difficult task. Since it is a dynamic process, a follow-up evaluation was indispensable to give feedback on what had been achieved and what was to be done further. In 2008 the self-evaluation and external evaluation on progress made in the period between 2002/03 and 2005/06 were carried out. The recommendations for improving the quality that emerged from this reports were supposed to be aligned with the Law on Higher Education from 2008. To this effect, the new Statute, in accordance with the new legal regulation, had to be prepared and enacted. At the end of 2008 the new Statute came into force, and the subunits of the University prepared 'Regulations'. The process of curricula reform according to the ECTS, was completed in the academic 2008/2009. Regarding the readjustment of the undergraduate study programs on the level of the entire University, the model 4 + 1 was accepted by the majority study

programs. Some of the faculties embraced the 3 + 2 model or model of integrating both undergraduate and graduate study programs for the period of 5 or 6 years.

In order to become an autonomous, integrated university, UKIM undertook activities for the harmonization of the functions and entire domains of activity with the new legal framework. The main benefits of the integrated university supposed to be the increased transparency of all academic proceedings and providing a joint budget that enable individual faculties to undertake projects which would otherwise be unavailable. Together with a new organizational structure, integration consisted of collective regulations regarding the quality assurance mechanisms, the structure of the programs of study, the procedures for appointing academic staff, organization of teaching etc. The new legislation also has changed the previous practice of earning a Doctoral degree. Establishment of the third cycle of study –Doctoral studies was one of the most important reform in higher education in Republic of Macedonia. In 2010 UKIM adopted the *Regulations, criteria and rules of admission to doctoral level studies*, and its implementation started the next academic year with programs of study that had been accredited. In 2011 the second follow-up self-evaluation and external evaluation took place in order to find out how UKIM evolved since the previous evaluation. Finally, this academic year (2012/2013) UKIM is in the process of harmonization of study programs with the latest amendments to the Law on higher education [13], the Statute and other legal acts.

## **2. Research problem and method**

Taking into account that the last decade was the most challenging for the Higher education institutions in Republic of Macedonia, this paper discusses how UKIM has changed in order to improve in

the period between two follow-up evaluations. More precisely, the aim of this study is:

- to analyze the implementation of Bologna Declaration in UKIM through the lens of the commission for self-evaluation and the external one;
- to compare the reports (2008 and 2011) from both the internal and the external evaluations in two follow-up periods (between 2002/03 and 2005/06, and between 2006/07 and 2009/10);
- to compare my personal view, as a member of academic staff in UKIM, regarding the Bologna implementation, with the results of the evaluation.

It is hypothesized that evaluation reports from 2011, compared with the ones from 2008, show progress in the process of Bologna implementation in UKIM, both from the part of the commission for self-evaluation and the external one. Further, it is postulated that implementation of Bologna principles and ECTS in UKIM is not quite adequate to the proposed directions regarding curricula, students' assessment, professor: student ratio, teaching practice, learning outcomes, availability of literature etc. (Bologna vs. 'Bologna')

The verification of the postulated theses is carried out through the comparative analysis of the following official documents:

- Summary of the Self-evaluation Report of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje in the period 2002/03-2005/06 (2008);
- Ss. Cyril and Methodius University EUA Follow-up Report in the period 2002/03-2005/06 (2008);
- Summary of the Self-evaluation Report of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje in the period 2006/07-2009/10 (2011);

- Ss. Cyril and Methodius University EUA Follow-up Report in the period 2006/07-2009/10 (2011).

### 3. Results

The main goal of Bologna Declaration [11] was to establish European area of higher education with the following objectives: 1. Adoption of a system of **easily readable and comparable degrees** through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement; 2. Adoption of a system essentially based on **two main cycles**, undergraduate and graduate; 3. Establishment of a **system of credits (ECTS)** 4. Promotion of **mobility** for students, teachers and researchers; 5. Promotion of European co-operation with regard to **quality assurance**; 6. Promotion of **European dimension** into higher education.

UKIM accepted Bologna Declaration as its strategy with the following priorities [5]:

- Development and preservation of the academic autonomy,
- European Credit Transfer System full implementation,
- Harmonization and compatibility of the study programs with the EU model of university,
- System of Quality assurance with evaluation and accreditation of study programs,
- Student and academic staff mobility,
- Openness to all students on the basis of equality,
- Promotion of life-long learning,
- Readable and comparable degrees.

According to the EUA follow-up report from 2008, the Bologna process is being implemented in UKIM, with some expected difficulties. Taking into account the recommendations offered in the initial external evaluation from 2003, the EUA team estimated the degree of implementation of each recommendation

concerning **structural reorganization, internal quality assurance development, teaching and learning, research, spending and finance**. It was concluded that recommendation for the new internal structure for UKIM as an integrated university had not been implemented as the previous law on higher education did not provide the adequate framework for it. Concerning **internal quality assurance development**, it was noticed that in 2006 the University set up an evaluation commission that started working with EUA 2003 recommendations and developed plan for following up the progress. As a result of these activities, the commission produced a self evaluation report analysing the period between 2002-2003 and 2005-2006. Further, while efforts had been made to University-wide implementation of ECTS with internal credit transfer first, it was pointed out that some staff members remain reluctant to adopt the new structure and that intra-university transfers were very rare in the analyzed period. Also, in some cases curricula reform led to increased workload for both teachers and students, that implies need for rationalization. Regarding changes in the system of student assessment and examination, it was underlined that efforts to reduce subjectivity in student assessment could produce risks in going too far in automatisation of the examination process. Further modernization of teaching methods and student centered learning was recommended in forthcoming period and for this purpose teachers training in interactive methodology was encouraged. The problem of brain drain remained unsolved because of the overall conditions in Macedonia and it was suggested the University to develop measures to provide better employment opportunities for the recent graduates within the country. Concerning research, it was noted that in the analyzed period the University had not established a centralized research body, but some steps were made toward partnerships

with higher education institutions abroad to award joint degrees and to increase international research performance. It was suggested to stimulate interdisciplinary research and more efforts to be made trying to convince the government to increase its funding of research from 0.25 % to 3% of GDP, being European Union goal for research funding. Finally, the follow-up evaluation team noticed that the criteria for allocating funds are not clearly stated and the financing system of Macedonian universities should be reformed to a transparent one.

EUA follow-up report from 2011 for the period between 2006/07-2009/10 showed that UKIM had evolved since 2008 especially in the process of integration of faculties, implementation of ECTS and internalization. The full implementation of the **University integration** involved new regulations related to a new organisational structure, changes in academic procedures and a joint financial model. An appropriate level of autonomy had been retained at faculties. The Senate became the highest governing body of the University and students' participation in Senate increased to 18 % of the total. Also, the new law from 2008 restructured independent student union into student parliament. However, the evaluation team listed the following recommendation for the forthcoming period to be accomplished: 1.to decrease paperwork and workload related to procedures at faculty level; 2.to consider further possibilities for merging institutes with related faculties; 3. to promote further development of trans-faculty learning opportunities into study programs, including a major and a minor, or even double degrees; 4. to reinforce the administrative staff through appropriate training to face challenges of the integration process; 5. to build a comprehensive central Quality Assurance policy and framework.

Regarding **implementation of ECTS and Bologna process**, the evaluation team stated that ECTS is



implemented at the whole UKIM. Students welcomed the new regulations related to the appointment of academic staff, as well as quality of teaching and transparency in assessment. Along with the old model of achieving PhD, the new law had introduced a new model for doctoral studies to be put into effect, and it was the major challenge for the University to plan ahead its organization. The recommendations for improvement in this area were the following: 1. to clarify what the ECTS and the Bologna process actually represent in order to overcome unequal understanding across the UKIM ; 2. to find ways to remove the student view of “barriers” between teachers and students; 3. to modernize teaching methods; 4. to develop a more explicit approach to staff development (training programs).

Finally, it was reported that UKIM put into practice several funding arrangements for students and staff **mobility and internationalization**:

- **BASILEUS** (Balkan Academic Scheme for the Internationalization of Learning together with EU Universities) 2008/09,
- **JoinEU-SEE Erasmus Mundus** (academic mobility between countries of the EU and the Western Balkans) 2009/10,
- **ERASMUS** Life Long Learning.

Also, UKIM participated in several projects supported by European funds and it was the first Macedonian university that organized joint degrees with several other European universities. However, the number of exchanges was very small, and evaluation team recommended to increase the number of exchange students by offering more courses taught in English language and to stimulate staff exchanges through grant schemes.

Comparison between two follow-up self-evaluations shows that UKIM has made a number of positive transformations in all areas of activity and that in this period efforts have been made to follow recommendations arising from the Bologna process and suggested by EUA evaluation team. Besides the structural reorganization leading to the University integration, progress has been made in implementation of ECTS (efficiency of the process of studies, quality of teaching, access to relevant literature etc), in opportunities for students to apply for EU programs and scholarships, as well as in mobility of staff and postgraduates for research and lectures (Table 1.). A step forward is made in giving students legal right for representation in every managing body of the University and the faculties, participation in the self-evaluation process and assessment of the teaching staff [1].

Table 1. Comparison between some results from Self-evaluation reports in two follow-up periods (UKIM, 2008 and 2011): positive changes

Period 2002/03- 2005/06	Period 2006/07- 2009/10
<b>ECTS implementation</b>	<b>Reorganization</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Replacement of fixed courses with obligatory, elective or optional ones (increased number of elective courses);</li> <li>- New forms of continuous assessment;</li> <li>- Teaching is moving towards becoming student-centered;</li> <li>- Earning a Doctoral degree on the basis of supervised preparation and defense of thesis (not designed according to the ECTS) ;</li> <li>- High percentage of students who use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integration of the University;</li> <li>- New normative acts (Regulations, Criteria and Rules) ;</li> <li>- Increased students participation in governing bodies;</li> <li>- Quality assurance procedures;</li> <li>- Integrated publishing at the University.</li> </ul>
	<b>ECTS implementation</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introducing doctoral studies</li> <li>- Increase in the number of awarded</li> </ul>

photocopied materials (73%).	Master degrees (25,89%)
<b>Students</b>	- Progress in the quality of teaching and respecting students opinions
- Effectiveness of studying is improved, but still not up to the desired level;	- Progress in compatibility and comprehensibility of the literature
- Completely informed regarding the rules of study (24%);	- Decreased percentage of students who use photocopied materials (59%)
- 76% of students regularly attend lectures;	<b>Students</b>
- Outflow of qualified graduates from the country, primarily as the result of the unfavorable circumstances on the labor market;	- The success rate of the students has increased;
- 73% of students have access to the prescribed readings through using photocopied materials;	- Completely informed regarding the rules of study (35%);
- National structure of students: 14,39% students who are not ethnic Macedonians.	- The level of accessibility of information for students has improved;
<b>Mobility, networking and internalization</b>	- Higher efficiency of the process of studies (shortened average duration of the studies) ;
- Signing of over 70 bilateral cooperation agreements;	- Improvement in class attendance and fulfillment of the assignments of the students;
- TEMPUS program (76 joint European projects);	- National structure of students: upward trend in the number of students who are not ethnic Macedonians (20,07 %);
- Utilization of 350 grants for individual mobility within the member countries of the EU and Central and Eastern Europe.	<b>Academic staff</b>
	- Increased number of associates that have Master degrees;
	- Criteria regarding the procedure for the appointment of academic staff.
	<b>Mobility, networking and internalization</b>
	- BASILEUS (2008/09) ;
	- JoinEU - SEE Erasmus Mundus (2009/10);
	- ERASMUS Life Long Learning;
	- 120 students from UKIM studied at European HEI;
	- 27 students from Europe studied at UKIM.

Besides these good practices, comparative analysis of the reports indicates some areas to be work on further because of status quo or even deterioration (Table 2). One serious problem that is emphasized in both evaluation reports of UKIM is the **ageing of the academic staff**. Obviously, in the period between two

evaluations not much has been done to improve the situation. The fact is that it is almost impossible to replace retired professors as the government does not allow it. The result is that total age structure at the University is dominated by the academic staff of the age group over 45 years, with variations across the scientific

domains. This situation have impact on **overburdening of the actual academic staff** and, subsequently, on the quality of teaching. The average professor- assistant and professor/ assistant-students ratio at the University is far from desirable and this situation is still worse on more attractive study programs where courses are taught with large number of students. Of course, the large number of students in relation to members of the academic and associate staff encumbers the proper implementation of the ECTS.

The results of the student surveys in both evaluation periods show that students constantly complain about **extensive content of the subjects, overload assignments**, not clearly formulated **exam questions** and lack of opportunities of gaining **practical knowledge and skills**. Regarding **student mobility**, there is very low level of awareness of the existence of the exchange program and still small number of students utilized the given opportunity.

Table 2. Comparison between some results from Self-evaluation reports in two follow-up periods (UKIM, 2008 and 2011): without changes or decline

Period 2002/03 - 2005/06	Period 2006/07 - 2009/10
<b>Students</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students are overloaded due to the increased number of classes per week and other assignments;</li> <li>- Lack of practical training in addition to acquiring theoretical knowledge</li> </ul>	<b>Misunderstanding of the ECTS</b>
<b>Academic staff</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low number of employments;</li> <li>- Age structure (over 70% of full-time professors are older than 55).</li> </ul>	<b>Students</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The extensive content of the materials needed for exam study;</li> <li>- The large student groups causing overcrowding during classes and lectures;</li> <li>- Lack of opportunities of gaining practical knowledge and skills;</li> <li>- Lack of information regarding internal and external student mobility, as well as regarding the labor market and employment opportunities.</li> </ul>
<b>Mobility, networking and internalization</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low percentage of students who have access to information regarding students exchange program.</li> </ul>	<b>Academic staff</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low number of employments (no replacement of retired professors) ;</li> <li>- Decrease of 3,1% in the academic teaching staff;</li> <li>- Decreased number of associates with Doctoral degrees;</li> <li>- Age structure (75% of professors above 45 years old);</li> <li>- Deficiency of younger academic teaching staff with academic titles (assistants mostly 25-35, and above);</li> <li>- Overburdening of the academic staff, especially assistants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• professor: assistant – 2:1</li> <li>• professor: students – 1:25</li> <li>• assistant: students – 1:45</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Funding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Government does not provide additional financial support for Bologna process implementation;</li> <li>- Reduced inflow of assets from the budget due to accreditation of other state universities.</li> </ul>	

### **Mobility, networking and internalization**

- Low level of awareness of the existence of the students exchange program (19%) and the Erasmus coordinators (12%).

### **Funding**

- Lack of additional public funding for supporting the integration;
  - One University account for funds allocated by the Budget of the RM.
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## **4. Conclusion**

This paper is focused on the evolution of the Bologna Process implementation at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje in the period between 2002/03 and 2009/10 as being self-evaluated and evaluated from EUA commission. According to the reports from both of them in two follow-up periods, it could be concluded that the ECTS in first and second cycle of studies is applied in every member of University and a number of positive changes have been made in all areas of its activity.

Nevertheless, there are still weaknesses due to an objective economic situation in the Republic of Macedonia or to a subjective understanding of "Bologna philosophy". And this is not a case solely in Republic of Macedonia. As it is stated in the EUA follow-up report (2011, p.148) "In many European countries, the process has been used by governments to introduce and/or achieve reforms that are not really related to Bologna." Report on progress in quality assurance in higher education, published by the European Commission in 2009 emphasizes that the standards are misinterpreted and "they are seen either as a checklist or formal requirements, as a code of good professional practice, or as soft guidelines".[4] Kurelić (2009) also points out that Bologna Process had been misrepresented in Croatian higher education and it is distortion of the original

idea (Bologna vs. 'Bologna'). Rodin (2009) interprets the huge discrepancy between the goals envisaged by Bologna Declaration and its implementation in Croatia with the lack of common understanding of the key elements of the process. It happens when there is no genuine will to significantly change the tradition of higher education, but rather to satisfy formal requirements.

Speaking of UKIM in this respect, EUA evaluation team found unequal understanding across the University of what the concept of student-centered learning is, what learning outcomes actually are, and how they could help improving teaching and learning processes. It is recommended faculties to describe their education in terms of learning outcomes, competences, and the appropriate qualification framework.

My personal view regarding the Bologna implementation, as a member of academic staff in UKIM, partly overlap with the reports, but still there are weak sides that are not bring on surface and may give illusion of progress. For example, the low drop-out rate and quantity of graduates and masters does not mean necessarily the quality, but rather lower criteria for successful achievement. Furthermore, overburdening of the academic staff makes it difficult to have serious approach to each student learning and to research efforts. On the other hand, the same academic staff is asked to achieve high standards for academic promotion, without taking into



account that for this purpose sufficient time and budget are needed. In respect of this, more bottom-up approach to educational policy is desirable. The most obvious example of ECTS misinterpretation is allocation of credits within first and second cycle programs. It seems that credits distribution is formal and that mathematical operation is more important than the meaning of credit as a measure of student load.

If our goal is high quality higher education, it is necessary all participants in this process to take seriously recommendation for improvement and to try to avoid the catch of distorted Bologna.

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