9. Structural Reforms

9.1 Introduction

“By 2020 we are determined to achieve an EHEA where our common goals are implemented in all member countries to ensure trust in each other’s higher education systems; where automatic recognition of qualifications has become a reality so that students and graduates can move easily through out it; where higher education is contributing effectively to build inclusive societies, founded on democratic values and human rights; and where educational opportunities provide the competences and skills required for European citizenship, innovation and employment.”

(Yerevan 2015)

By 2018 all common goals quotes here have not been implemented in all member countries hence The Bologna Follow up Group (BFUG) suggestion to intensify implementation within the following three key commitments; A Three- Cycle system compatible with the QF-EHEA and scaled by ECTS; Compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention; Quality Assurance in Conformity with ESG. In in order to ensure trust in one anothers’ Higher Education systems.

The three key commitments, henceforth referred to as structural reforms, whilst interdependent of one another all serve to achieve the greater initial ambitions of the Bologna Process; a unified system of readable and comparable degrees, a system based on two cycles; a credit system; the promotion of mobility; cooperation in the field of quality assurance; the promotion on a European dimension of Education (Sin et al. 2016:83). The 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018:17) acknowledges the national advancement of implementing the structural reforms, as do the National Unions of Students (NUSes) nevertheless, they are critical about the implementation.

The following chapter deals with the perceptions of the implementation of the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), the European Credits Transfer System (ECTS) and the Three-cycle system by the National Unions of Students. For further reading about implementation in the field of Quality Assurance, see chapter 6.
9.2 Main Findings

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS – comparability across EHEA

Through the adoption of the Berlin Communique in 2003 (Berlin, 2003) Qualification Frameworks (QF) have been on the Bologna Process (BP) agenda. QFs have been described as a tool to create a workforce with comparable degrees as an outcome from “the European market of higher education” (Haukland 2017:265). For the past 15 years, the majority of the EHEA countries have developed NQFs in compliance with the European Qualifications Framework. Despite the implementation of NQFs in the majority of the EHEA countries, students are still facing difficulties getting their qualification recognised.

Fig. 09.01: Is there a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in your country, and if so, how often is it being used?
As shown in figure 08.01 and 08.02 the existence and frequency of NQFs being used and satisfaction/dissatisfaction of NQFs are not always coherent. Analysing closely the cases of Slovenia, Germany and Romania the difference between pure existence and actual satisfaction is embodied.

According to the Slovenian NUS, SSU, the translation of degrees’ in compliance with EQF is not satisfactory in their country. Degrees that are coherent with a BA- degree in the Bologna structure have been translated to a MA-degree when moving from the former system into the current system, SSU explains. They add that they are concerned about the development and conclude that the MA degrees have been generated by a (mis)translation resulting in not being coherent with the standards of EQF.
Fzs, the German NUS are of the opinion that their NQF is stagnating. Stagnation or lack of interest in further development of NQFs can be found in other countries as well leading to a lack of positivity from the NUSes towards the development and introduction on NQFs.

In Romania, according to their NUS, ANOSR, the NQF is always being used, yet, they are dissatisfied. The cause of the dissatisfaction is due to the way in which the National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education was carried out; without a profound and continuous consultation of students and employers. The lack of consultation leads to the faulty implementation by the Higher Education Institutions, ANOSR adds.

The most satisfied NUSes with both the implementation and the frequency it is being used are the NUSes in Scotland and Ireland. Both Ireland and Scotland had already developed NQFs proceeding the development of the European Qualifications Framework. According to the NUS in Ireland, USI, their NQF was quickly moved to ensure comparability with the EQF once it was developed. USI adds that the NQF is well recognised by the students and the Higher Education Institutions.

NQFs that are in compliance with the EQF celebrates 15 years on the BP agenda, nonetheless, governments still have work to do. NQFs should not only be used "quite often" and the National Unions of Students should not be dissatisfied or very dissatisfied about the implementation and applicability of the tool. If the ambitious goal of a shared educated workforce is to be achieved.

**European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)**

The ECTS is an integral part of the Bologna system, acting as a cornerstone for recognition in and out of mobility, a tool for a transparent qualification frameworks, distributing students’ workload across semesters, and accounting for both contact learning and individual work done by students. However, the proper implementation of the ECTS is often the main obstacle to the efficient and transparent creation and development of curricula in higher education institutions.

Out of 43 NUSes, 28 stated that the ECTS system is always used, while nine stated that it is used “very often”. Two NUSes – LSA, Latvia and HÖOK, Hungary, said that the ECTS is only rarely used in their higher education system. LSA, who has been critical of the low prioritisation of the implementation of ECTS commented that “implementation of ECTS in Latvian Higher education system has not been a priority”, and has not really occurred. The situation is further complicated by two concurrently existing systems in Latvia, in which 2 Latvian credit points (KP) equal 3 ECTS, which makes recognition of prior learning both in a national and international context very complicated. Furthermore, when students are looking to get 2 ECTS recognized in the Latvian system, the systems are not compatible and credits cannot be fully transferred. This situation has been addressed by both LSA and ESU for a long time, including in the 2015 publication of Bologna with Student Eyes. The unevenness of the system was also previously addressed in the “Bologna with Student Eyes 2012”. Yet, the problem persists and the Latvian government has not prioritised the proper implementation of ECTS according to the ECTS Users’ Guide. A similar problem exists in Hungary, where most of the HEIs adhere to their old system instead of adapting to the ECTS.
Sadly, in Belarus, the ECTS is used unreliably and is causing doubts among students. The students of Belarus are not certain that the amount of ECTS given for passing a course is calculated in an accurate and correct way. The current system exists in parallel to the previous system of credits in Belarus. This results in an uncertainty among students whether the ECTS receiver in Belarusian HEIs can really be recognized by other European HEIs.

The Swedish National Union of students (SFS) also have significant grievances with the improper implementation of the ECTS in their Higher Education system. Even though the Swedish government claims to have reformed their education system completely to reflect the Bologna process, the reforms have not remained true to the purpose of the Bologna process. The Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) wants the Bologna reforms to remain true to their original purpose. They see reforms that deviate from that goals as counterproductive and misleading to the students.

26 of the 43 respondents stated that the number of ECTS in their country is always based on an estimation of the students’ workload; according to 7 of the respondents, the amount of ECTS is always based on the formulation of Learning Outcomes (LO). The most common variable used for calculating the amount of ECTS related to courses and programmes is an estimation of the students’ workload, with LO’s as a way of allocating ECTS in second place. This is confirmed both by the 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, upcoming), as well as the surveys completed for this publication. Teacher/student contact hours are used as a basis for calculating ECTS in half of the EHEA countries, and only in Cyprus and in Bulgaria as the only factor to base the calculation on (ibid).

Overall, the satisfaction with the implementation of ECTS is very varied across Europe. Out of 43 respondents, 19 NUSes were either satisfied or very satisfied with the implementation in their country. Meanwhile, 12 NUSes stated that they are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the implementation. Eleven unions stated that they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the situation of ECTS in their country. This illustrates that even though all EHEA countries use ECTS as a way to organise the national credits system on some level, it is not well-organised across Europe. The students’ reasons for dissatisfaction with the system are of a wide range. Compared to 2015, the level of students’ satisfaction with the ECTS has risen somewhat.
Fig. 09.03: In my country, the allocation of ECTS does happen on the basis of an estimation of the workload.
A common issue regarding the “calculation” of ECTS based on workload is the underestimation of students’ individual work. This is the case in both Belgium and Serbia, for example. Several more countries report general inconsistencies between the workload of students and the allocation of ECTS to given courses - this is an issue in Croatia, Iceland, Romania, Armenia, Italy, Switzerland, and several other countries. Another issue with consistency relates to international mobility and the recognition of those credits - the perception of workload differs between countries, which leads to unequal study experiences and great differences in workload for students both in and out of mobility. These problems are not new and have already been highlighted in previous research regarding the implementation of ECTS, including in previous “Bologna with Student Eyes” publications.

The inequalities between systems are rooted in the fact that the estimations of students’ workload can be arbitrary and based on “guesstimations” of the lecturers and professors responsible for the courses, instead of being a result of accurate calculations and estimations of the perceived difficulty of the course. A correctly implemented ECTS should
take into account that students’ learning needs are different, and the ECTS has to account for that to achieve every students’ mastering of the LOs.

THREE- CYCLE SYSTEM

The three cycle system is the system harmonizing the amount of credits a student should obtain for a Bachelor-, Masters-, and Phd degree across EHEA. Initially only BA and MA degrees were considered but in 2003 the 3rd cycle, Phd level was absorbed and the three cycle system was constituted in its current form.

According to ESUs members, there has not been any significant development in the implementation of the three cycle system since 2015, however, there has been an increase in criticisms on how “old” degrees have been poorly translated into the 3 cycle system with issues ranging from leaving students with more work but with less time, whether or not Phd students are considered to be students or not, to leaving Phd students out from Student benefits in, for example, Germany; and finally the cheeky move of the labour market demanding a MA degree from the students in order to be considered employable.

The last example, more common in 2018 than in 2015, challenges the initial intention of the BP by the labour market demanding higher level of qualification for a job that might require less (Sin et al 2016:83). This trend is not solely detected by the NUSEs; the 2018 Bologna Implementation report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018:17) announces the same worrying trend.

Part-time/ full-time dilemma

The mode of study, whether full- or part-time, has been put forward as a tool for either an increase or decrease in widening participation to higher education. Flexible learning paths and part time studies enables education mainly for adult learners, students with children and working students due to the need of an income to cover their living costs and tuition fees.
Fig. 09.05: Is it possible to study part-time any of the cycles?

As figure 08.05 illustrates; in the majority of the countries, it is possible to study part-time. Even if it might be possible to study part-time, with or without certain circumstances, one or all cycles it does not always fulfil the goal of enabling non-traditional learners to enrol and graduate from HE. In Denmark for example, HE is tuition free; if studied full time. According to the Danish NUS, DSF, some BA- and MA programmes are available part-time but in exchange for payment of a tuition fee. In Croatia, to study part-time is rather a concept in theory rather than in practice since students are asked to complete 60 ECTS during the academic year regardless of studying part time. Shifting from theories of part time studies, to the cases part time only being available if the student can call on mitigating circumstances, medical reasons and disabilities are the most common denominator allowing part time study paths. Less accepted is employment, regardless of the purpose of the employment; paying the tuition fee or career development.
Time restrictions

As demonstrated in figure 09.06, in the majority of countries and cycles, there are time restrictions in place for students to complete a cycle, leaving less flexibility to the study path for the student. In the cases of restrictions, the two most common consequences, in 18 out of 35, are that the students cannot complete their studies or they are even expelled and in 17 out of 35 cases there are financial sanctions with regards to student support measures. Adding on the restrictions, that can be perceived as penalties, in Serbia, students have to retake the entry exam and in Iceland, students exceeding the time restriction have to re-enrol and re-do all the courses. The restriction does though have exceptions in many countries which have exceptions allowing students to "exceed the time restriction". The main issues are, sickness (27 out of 40) and Parental leave (22 out of 24) and in 13 of 40 cases a mandate in the students' union allows "delays" in a course programme a sabbatical year). In regards to flexible study paths, both in Belarus and Serbia, the exception of student's not able to pay their tuition fee are used as excuses for delays. ESU argues for tuition-free education (ESU 2016) on the basis of that no one should be excluded from enrolling or graduate on the basis of lack of financial means. The system in place in Serbia and Belarus can be understood as a solution to the problem of tuition fees, but in line with ESU policy, the problem should be solved in other ways rather than used as the exception of delayed completion. Leaving our comments of the time restrictions on a positive note, in four EHEA countries there is no time restrictions to complete any of the cycles, according to the NUSes in Luxembourg, Austria, Armenia and Slovenia.
Fast completion

Why should students graduate faster? In almost half of the countries, on either institutional and/or national level (Inst. 21 out of 43 and Nat 16 out of 22) there are measures such as limited financial support in place to accelerate the students’ completion. Through the article Employability deconstructed: the perceptions of Bologna stakeholders (2016) Cristina Sin and Guy Neave analyse the perception of employability and how it has been debated in the Bologna Process. One of the initial purposes of the Bologna Process was de facto increased employability within the EHEA, facilitated by recognisable degrees. Delayed completion both delays the transition to the labour market and increases the costs for the HEIs, even if this may be the case, students should not be pushed through the system. Students are not a factory made product where instruments for faster learning can be used. A proposal to make students graduate faster is being discussed in the UK, with the creation of a fast track where students are guided through the curricula intended to take three years in two (McKee & Siddique 2017). Following the ECTS users guide, there should be a balance between the amount of LO and time dedicated in order to complete for the credits.

9.3 Conclusions and considerations for the future

Since 2015 no major developments have been noted. The problems highlighted in the 2015 edition of Bologna with Student Eyes remain. Some problems have increased, others decreased. The conclusions can yet, once more, be drawn; that there is not a full and proper implementation of the mentioned structural reforms, the Bologna Process cannot be shown to be a full success story where students and graduates fully can move between the countries. The ECTS remains an unevenly and unreliably implemented system that creates mistrust in students, many of whom are not confident in the system on the whole.

9.4 Recommendations

- Review the quality of the National Qualifications Frameworks to ensure full compliance with EQF.
- Implement the whole of ECTS reliably across Europe. The implementation must be according to the ECTS Users’ Guide. This includes basing ECTS on workload and LOs, not other characteristics.
- The three cycle system should enable flexibility, not constrain it. Enable students on an individual basis decide when the next cycle should be started.
- Develop more flexible cycles for students to be able to study part-time without certain circumstances for exceptions.
Abandon time restrictions on the time for completing one or all cycles.

9.5 References


