

ALBANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM THROUGH THE BOLOGNA PROCESS: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNATIONALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Implementation of reforms has diversified the Bologna process model with Albanian elements. Almost all European countries show a growing responsibility by opening offices that manage programs with an international function. More institutions are developing an integrated approach to internationalization in teaching and research. This paper aims to highlight the importance of the need to understand the current situation, challenges, and progress made to the internationalization of higher education in the country in response to the European Higher Education Area. The study examines how the interaction between existing institutional models and international initiatives has influenced the evolution of higher education in Albania. The secondary data from the literature review and the qualitative primary data, generated from the semi-structured interviews taking from ten leaders of private and public higher education institutions have been used to explore this issue. The findings indicate a lack of involvement and collaboration among institutions and academic staff to improve the reform process, especially that of internationalization of higher education. As a result, Institutions are required to develop a strategy that defines the scope of the internationalization, orientation, and educational development, as well as research activities in line with the development of Bologna reform.

Keywords: Internationalization, Mobility, Reforms, Challenge, Bologna Process, European Higher Education Area.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Understanding a dynamic process as it unfolds is by no means an easy task. The academic changes of the last centuries are truly global and have affected many institutions of higher education (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). Albania signed the Bologna Declaration in 2003. The Bologna process has launched some strategic challenges and for the Higher Education Institutions, an obvious challenge is that of internationalization. Challenges and achievements related to the internationalization of policies in higher education during the period 2003-2020 are the objects of this study. These discussions are required to be seen in the context of the reforms on analyzing the harmonization of Albanian higher education with the standards and practices of the European Higher Education Area focusing on the strategies and policies of higher education institutions and the actions of other actors involved in the governance of higher education. The study examines how the interaction between existing institutional models and international initiatives has influenced the evolution of higher education in Albania. This study provides an analysis of the problems encountered in the most important dimensions of change, which the higher education system in the country is facing for the successful implementation of the Bologna Process. The purpose of this paper is to examine trends in central issues, as well as contextual factors in higher education in the past

decade, and present perspectives for the near future. Although many of these trends are not new, the implications of these developments need to be addressed. We are confident that the issues addressed in this paper will continue, as these are difficult issues that cannot be easily resolved. But, it is important to keep in mind how these old and new challenges are addressed by the changes around us.

INTRODUCTION

The Bologna Process was an initiative of the education ministers of several European countries: France, Italy, Great Britain, and Germany, in the 1990s, who sought to respond to the challenges that the European integration process was posing to the education sector. At their first meeting at the Sorbonne, they agreed on harmonizing the architecture of the European higher education system. This initiative was approved in other countries and in 1999 twenty-nine ministers of education of European countries signed the Bologna Declaration, which laid the foundation for the establishment of a European Higher Education Area, and which would be supported at the level global. The process has contributed to the cultural enrichment and diversity of Europe and continues to inform and enrich the experience of European citizens from all countries.

Bologna is not for the homogenization of all systems, but supports autonomy and flexibility, promotes comparison and recognition through the ease of articulation of different national frameworks, as well as the compatibility of these frameworks with EHEA. The Bologna Process supports the idea of autonomous institutions, the cultural and linguistic diversity of the European continent, as a key principle of the European Union, of the freedom of movement of European citizens and workers in the European Economic Area.

Albania signed its participation in the Bologna Process in 2003, which was followed by a series of reforms in higher education, such as structural reforms at all levels of higher education, reform of the expansion and massification of higher education, which includes also the provision of higher education by private institutions the period of reform of the higher education system and the adaptation of curricula according to the Bologna Process. Higher education has changed profoundly in the last two decades, so those involved in the academic enterprise still face the implications of these changes. Academic institutions and systems have faced pressures from increasing student numbers, demographic changes, demands for accountability, reconsideration of the social and economic role of higher education, the impact of new technologies. (Altbach, 1999), and among others with the internationalization of education. The implementing actors of the Bologna Process are the governments of the states, through the ministries and agencies that run higher education, and the institutions of higher education. Despite the implementation of European standards in higher education in the policy-making and legislative framework, Albania is still far from achieving the intended standards (EC, 2014). The Bologna process has radically affected the university space in Albania and has posed new challenges.

In this context, it was chosen to study the Bologna reform in higher education, focusing on the challenge of internationalization, where among the main questions is:

- What is the context of the Bologna reform and what are the challenges and issues it raises in the country?
- What are the perceptions on the main issues according to the actors of higher education institutions in the country?
- What is the connection between internationalization and other challenges/issues of higher education institutions in the country?

Most of the reasons focusing on the challenge of internationalization are: First, education is one of the strategic priorities of development, which guarantees progress. Its role is interrelated with all the characteristics of a society. In this context, we are required to emphasize the importance of the challenge of drafting an international strategic plan for higher education in the country, which would require time, resources, and long-term commitment, but would have incalculable positive effects in all areas and especially in the development of the country. Second, there are not many comprehensive studies on the implementation of the Bologna reform and the challenge of internationalization in the country. The lack of studies in this field was one of the reasons to approach such a topic. Albania is involved in the implementation of the objectives of the Bologna Process and the period of more than two decades is suitable for conducting comprehensive studies. Third, this study was to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges, which will help policymakers and universities in drafting an agenda for the future of the Bologna Process in Albania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization of Higher Education

There has been little understanding to find a single definition of internationalization; hence the definitions for it are numerous. Different terms have been used concerning the internationalization of higher education. Among the most used terms are those related to curriculum, international studies, global studies, multicultural education, intercultural education, peace education or mobility issues for study abroad, academic mobility (Knight, 2008). In the literature and practice of internationalization of higher education, it is still quite common to use terms that address only a part of internationalization and/or emphasize a specific reason for the use of internationalization (De-Wit, 2002) Hans De Wit emphasized the international dimension of higher education, where people tend to use it in a way that best suits their purpose (De-Wit, 2002). The most common definition of internationalization at the institutional level refers to the process of integrating an international or intercultural aspect into the teaching, research, and service functions of internationalization (Knight, 1994). Petter Scott observes that internationalization and globalization are complex phenomena with many strands, and concludes that they overlap, and are intertwined, in all ways (Scott, 2005). Teichler argues that globalization has been replaced by internationalization in the public debate over higher education by emphasizing a shift in meanings (Teichler, 2004). More specifically, according to Teichler (2004), internationalization has affected the following aspects of higher education policies:

- i. The dimension of knowledge, or more specifically, issues related to the movement of knowledge across borders;
- ii. Assessment control and recognition of teaching, and research results;
- iii. Problems of international homogeneity or the diversity of structural elements of higher education (such as qualification criteria for study and admission systems, study programs, diplomas and professional rights of diplomas, types of higher education institutions, academic staff and ways of financing);
- iv. Scope of actors' policies (such as national policies of higher education institutions or ministries of education versus international ones);
- V. The direction of higher education as a whole (such as the role of national governments, national and international professional associations, international organizations, global markets, etc., as well as the ways of running). Whereas Altbach, et al., (2009) point out that internationalization is defined as the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement in response to globalization. What has changed over

the last ten years to the internationalization of higher education is the model from the most cooperative to a more competitive model (Van-der-Wende & Marijke, 2001).

According to Fröhlich (2008), there are different emphases for internationalization strategies, approaches to education are filtered and contextualized by a specific internal university context, by type of university, and as by national developments. But, in a comparative study of internationalization strategies in Europe, Vega, et al., (2005) also argue that the internationalization of higher education is a complex and often fragmented multidimensional process. Factors that promote or hinder internationalization cannot be seen only from the international context they develop at the national and institutional level. These influences deeply rooted in normative and cultural knowledge, such as history and culture; disciplines and academic subjects; individual profile initiatives of higher education institutions; national policies; regulatory framework; finance; European challenges, opportunities, and globalization (Nicoline et al., 2005).

Given this complexity, it is clear that internationalization has not been a linear process and has not developed uniformly horizontally, in the sense that it shows large inequalities and imbalances between different countries and regions of the world.

Internationalization of Higher Education and the Bologna Process

The Bologna Process has launched many strategic challenges for higher education institutions, which reflect impacts on the development of the European Higher Education Area. Some aspects of Bologna still require implementation or reconsideration to overcome some of the local and national obstacles that currently prevail. The European Higher Education Area is evolving in an increasingly interconnected global context, and its international relevance is therefore of great importance. The responsibility rests with governments and institutions to explain reforms and to support these major cultural processes that have been set in motion (Crosier, et al., 2000). In general, Higher Education Institutions in continental Europe are facing problems such as financing of higher education (privatization); internationalization, reputation (mobility); equal access and diversity; the importance of studies (labor market demands); and the role of the state to institutions (responsibility) (Sporn, 1999).

According to the study conducted by the EUA three are considered the most important values: The Bologna process comes first where (78%) of Higher Education Institutions in Europe consider it as the most important. In the second place are considered quality assurance reforms with (63%), and the third internationalization (61%). While, regarding the most important developments in the next five years, at a more long-term strategic level, internationalization moves to the first place (22%), while quality assurance remains in second place (21%) and the Bologna Process moves to third place (15%) (EUA Trends, 2010). So, it has been identified by HEIs as the third most important element in the last three years and is expected to go to first place within the next five years.

Institutions are developing an integrated approach to the internationalization of teaching and research through a strategic partnership focus. However, it is still unclear whether this strategic approach will prevail. This is probably to show that the goals of the Bologna Process were almost achieved. The internationalization of higher education includes the need for equal access and diversity in European institutions. European universities needed to accommodate a diverse population by ethnicity and education, given the new forms of student and staff mobility, as well as migration. Enlargement has further enhanced this trend,

creating situations for which universities are often unprepared. Political development and economic change have put integration and diversity on the agenda in many nations in Europe which until now have been socially relatively homogeneous (Sporn, 1999).

The Bologna process itself is not primarily about internationalization, its main role is to protect European higher education from global competition. However, universities are determined to support internationalization strategies related to employment, mobility, and competitiveness issues. Other issues related to the Bologna Process and internationalization in general are:

- i. Diplomas and higher education systems that are more easily understood through a three-cycle study system;
- ii. Qualifications Framework, ECTS, Diploma Supplement, European Quality Assurance;
- iii. Creating a competitive knowledge-based economy (in line with the Lisbon agenda);
- iv. Increased interest in the Diploma Supplement;
- v. External mobility (<http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk>, 2012, p. 11).

Whereas, studies in the field of higher education at the international level have shown that more institutions are developing an integrated approach of internationalization in teaching and research. Almost all European countries show responsibility for growth by opening offices that manage programs with international functions. Thus, an increasing trend is also the importance of the profiling effects of Higher Education Institutions at the international level by establishing a strategic focus on partnerships and cooperation agreements for teaching, research and capacity building in line with general priorities institutional even if they are still unclear.

This development goes hand in hand with a clear trend of recent years towards the creation of relatively small networks of institutions as centers in search of ways of cooperation and development of their activities (EUA Trends, 2009). Studies conducted in terms of priority areas for international exchange show that there is not much change since 2007. EU countries and Europe, in general, remain the first and second choice (EUA, 2010).

The increase in internationalization in higher education and the interest in this issue is also reflected in the report of the European Commission, which argues that internationalization is characterized by two potentially contradictory tendencies. There is an increase in cooperation between Higher Education Institutions, departments, and individuals around the world, but also intensification in the international competition of institutions and countries competing for students and staff. First, they increase the number of domestic graduates for national labor markets, allowing the economies in question to improve their capabilities and thus increase the pressure on the European economy and European higher education to keep pace and compete. Second, it brings in new competitors in the higher education market who can attract prospective international students away from Europe by choosing to go abroad less for study. The overall landscape of higher education is already a complex picture of competition in some areas and cooperation in other areas. This complexity seems to be increasing recently (European Commission, 2011). It seems that geographical objectives are changing slightly and reflect the desire to explore new connections, beyond historical and cultural contexts. These new links are mainly promoted by national funds, incentives (with some European support) and influence the attraction of developing countries.

Internationalization of Higher Education and International Cooperation

The Bucharest Communication of 2012 stressed that cooperation with other regions in the world is a key factor in the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA,

2012). Different motives can determine the choice of international partners and specific regions for cooperation. While countries may have different external specifics or economic advantages, institutions may select partners based on factors such as their academic, research, or personal profile.

While according to the study of the European Commission in 2015, European countries present very different situations in terms of internationalization and mobility, especially when looking at their mobility flows and the level of engagement in international activities. Most countries have encouraged the internationalization of higher education in guidance documents. However, more than half of them do not have a national strategy for internationalization or guidelines of the various parties involved in the internationalization process. Higher education institutions in many countries also do not have comprehensive internationalization strategies, although they are increasingly engaged in internationalization activities such as joint study programs and cross-border research collaboration. Many countries have not adopted quantitative national targets to change forms of mobility (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

The wave of internationalization that has affected Europe over the past two decades cannot leave its periphery untouched. The internationalization of higher education is considered more of a political issue, so the reasoning/attitudes of regional countries at this point are different and consequently, they have different advantages. In developed countries, the internationalization of higher education is seen as a means to develop the economy and competition in Higher Education Institutions, while in the countries of the Western Balkans region this issue is seen more as a support for national reforms and institutional capacity building (Zgaga et al., 2013). This issue of higher education in the region has been supported by several international organizations such as EU programs, CARDS, TEMPUS, etc. This term in the region is often used in the same sense as "harmonization" and "modernization" of higher education.

According to Davas (1999) internationalization, including exchange programs, import, and export of advanced knowledge, exclusive rights, etc., seems to be a means of moving across national and institutional boundaries and thus globalizing higher education, setting global standards and policies. However, internationalization can also be a way to revitalize the academic profession in the aforementioned challenges, mainly by resource constraints and lack of sustainability. The most widespread projects in the region, identified by the EU, have been used to develop policy aspects and implement reforms in the education and research sectors. While these projects (EU programs, Erasmus-Mundus or CEEPUS and CEI) are funded mainly in cooperation with international partners, to promote the mobility of staff or students, having the opportunity to gain international education experiences.

The Bologna Process also presents strategic challenges for the countries of the Western Balkans, some of which reflect the issues of the current debate in education directly influenced by the Bologna Process such as:

- i) internationalization;
- ii) competition in a global market;
- iii) employment and skills;
- iv) lifelong learning and mobility (Laze, 2020).

In the Balkan countries, there are already several regional initiatives for education, research, and development. According to World Bank studies, these initiatives have a variety

of organizational structures and mandates, as well as representation from countries outside the region, and include:

- i. Countries with wide participation of countries, at a high level of participation and a broad mandate that goes beyond education and research, such as the Regional Cooperation Council (formerly the Stability Pact) and the Central European Initiative;
- ii. Bodies with closer participation of countries and technical representation from the ministries of education, such as the Education Reform Initiative in southeast Europe and the Human Capital Building Working Group, in the framework of the Regional Cooperation Council; and
- iii. Expert bodies with quota-paying members, such as the Association of European Universities (World Bank, 2008, p. 42). However, a strategic coordinator between faculties, departments, and institutions is lacking to develop good practices and help increase the quality of higher education in these countries. Even the few valuable practices that exist have not served this purpose.

According to a study conducted by Zgaga in 2013 on this issue, it turns out that there is little interest from the Western Balkan countries to increase cooperation between them. It is said that this has more to do with linguistic, cultural differences, and political circumstances. Academics from Albania (93.5%) and Kosovo (98.3%), in this report, are positioned as countries that want to establish cooperative relations with other institutions of higher education in the region, less interested in cooperation are Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia (Zgaga, et al., 2013). These countries prefer to establish cooperation relations with other countries beyond the region with a trend according to this ranking:

- a. With European countries (90%), while academics from Albania 99.4% want this cooperation the most. Another preference is the countries of North America and Canada, Albania ranks second in this election, while Kosovo (96.3%); Bosnia and Herzegovina (70%); Slovenia (71.4%) rank first (Zgaga, P., et al., 2013: 64).

According to Linden, Arnhold & Vasiliev (2008) there is a clear need for deeper regional cooperation in research and development. Regional cooperation between the countries of Southeast Europe can take two basic forms. In the first form, the activities are mainly national, but since all countries in the region face the same problems, they can be addressed jointly in a coordinated manner. Whereas, the second form of cooperation consists of activities that require a regional approach to be effective. Among the coordinated regional activities include:

- i) improving the quality assurance of universities through external mechanisms;
- ii) improving the quality assurance of universities through internal mechanisms;
- iii) supporting the establishment of internationally recognized data collection systems and university quality indicators; and
- iv) special support for young researchers. While integrated regional activities include:
 - i) regional center for quality assurance through external mechanisms;
 - ii) regional center of high quality, especially for scientific research and university education.

These centers are suggested in two forms:

- (a) different institutions of different countries, which specialize in different subjects, but which create clear profiles to encourage the movement of students and researchers; and
- (b) institutions from different countries, which work together to improve research (and teaching) in a given field;
 - iii) joint degree programs;
 - iv) grant program to support joint activities to improve teaching and learning;

v) a regional resource center for higher education.

Which would support the institutions in their efforts to implement the Bologna Process; disseminate information on good European and international practices in teaching and acquiring knowledge; would enable cooperation and movement on an international scale, would create capacities for the ministries of education and science as well as finance and promote agreements for movement between countries? Also, this study suggests that to enable regional cooperation, actions can be taken at three other levels: First, at the European level, where the context and framework in which countries reform their higher education and research systems scientifically, are increasingly defined by the European Union. Second, at the national level where governments are suggested to meet the requirements of the European Union by changing legislation, providing adequate funding, and eliminating obstacles to the movement of researchers and academics. They should also provide the basis for integrated universities and appropriate quality assurance systems through external mechanisms. Third, at the institutional level where it is suggested that European and international experience has shown that the future of higher education is strong autonomous universities so that they can perform their public duties but at the same time be accountable to society (Ibid, 2008). The administration of these institutions is required to be flexible and efficient, as they bear the primary responsibility for quality assurance and implementation of the Bologna Process.

The Bologna process has enough momentum to become the dominant global model of higher education within two decades (Adelman, 2009). The Bologna Process aims to compete in the global higher education market. There is an increase in competition in attracting international (non-EU market) students. The Bologna Process helps member countries to compete as a coherent group in the worldwide market. It is important to note that while there may be many benefits from individual member states as a result of engaging in the process, this is not about competing with each other (<http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk>, EUA, 2012, p. 12).

Rising competition in Europe for students and resources has forced universities to develop strategies to improve their image and reputation in specialized areas of research and training. The aim is to increase the quality of services in higher education (Sporn, 1999).

Other Issues Related to the Bologna Process and Internationalization

Competition and Globalization

The main goal of the Bologna Process is to provide the educational component needed to build a Europe of knowledge within a broad humanist vision. Various elements of the Bologna reforms have evolved, and have sometimes led to a fragmentation and instrumental view of education, which has not always found understanding between the various elements and the Higher Education Institutions. Coordinated communication efforts are needed. They should focus on the benefits of reforms for students, academics, employers, and society at large.

Data on higher education at institutional, national, and European levels need to be improved. The successful implementation of Bologna is partly conditioned by the capacity of institutional leaders to bring about multidimensional change coherence at the institutional level, to explain, persuade and motivate staff members and students. Therefore, emphasis should also be placed on institutional responsibility. Institutions are increasingly seen by politics as "economic engines", essential to ensure knowledge production through research

and innovation, as well as continuing education, helping to increase the workforce. The growing range of stakeholder networks and the expansion of higher education have resulted in the perception of the need to diversify the sector and to highlight institutional profiles, priorities, and strategies, individually and collectively, so that Higher Education Institutions be able to better respond to a variety of needs and requirements. The diversification agenda has been implemented to some extent successfully in some countries, while in others contradictory policies have led to a mission that has required time extension (Reichert, S., et al., 2005: 8). The globalization and imperatives of the knowledge society, which are affecting higher education almost everywhere in the world, have translated into two comprehensive European policies: The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy, with its subsequent EU 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2009).

Indeed, the Bologna Declaration (1999) has as one of its central objectives enlargement of European international competition in the higher education system. This is also why the Bologna Declaration and its objective is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), while the European Commission created the European Research Area (ERA). They aim to create a common area for students and academics to move as a basis for the political empowerment of Europe. The Lisbon Strategy aims to transform Europe into the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, with more emphasis on research and innovation, as well as expanded access to education and lifelong learning opportunities. Recognizing the importance of Higher Education Institutions and transforming them through the "Modernization Agenda" for expanded autonomy and improved governance (EUA, 2006), has become a central issue in achieving these objectives. This Agenda has been seen by many actors as one of the cornerstones of Europe's political construction.

The vision promoted within the Bologna Process is a clear confirmation of the understanding that the European Higher Education Area is part of the global context. By adopting a strategic document entitled "European Higher Education Area in a Global Environment", the ministers engaged in their respective countries to move forward in such policy areas as improving information, promoting the attractiveness and competitiveness of ZEAL, strengthening of partnership based on partnership, intensification of policy dialogue and improvement of knowledge (Sadlak, 2013). So, the Bologna Process is responding to the challenges of globalization which can be met by developing higher education.

Competition and Employment

Employment is one of the broader objectives of the Bologna Process. Its mechanisms aim at employing people within the signatory countries, where transparency, recognition of qualifications, and competencies are very important. While the effects of the economic crisis have been severe for employment in the EU, the impact on higher education graduates is less dramatic than on those with low qualifications. At the end of 2010, the average unemployment rate in the EU among graduates was 54%, compared to an overall unemployment rate of 9.3% (European Commission, 2011). A complex range of factors has influenced changes in graduate rates. In some cases, graduate unemployment can be explained by the mismatch between the number of graduates in individual disciplines, the importance of their qualifications and skills in the face of current labor market demands.

Promoting the employment of graduates in the labor markets is also influenced by technological developments, the emergence of new job profiles, and increasing opportunities for employment and self-employment, however, it is a major objective of ZEAL. What can be

considered a challenge for Higher Education Institutions within the Bologna Process is for graduates to have appropriate competencies to enter the labor market as well as to develop new competencies for their employment (EHEA 2015).

The Bologna Process also plays an important role in contributing to the Lisbon Strategy, which aims at sustainable growth and employment. Diversification of national systems of Higher education in Europe is an ambitious complex political and academic scenario, which over time will fundamentally transform many aspects of higher education at the institutional level, national and international within and outside Europe. Changes in the harmonization of higher education systems in a predominant number of European countries have made it a very attractive system for international students inside and outside Europe, and there is a growing concern about the issue of equitable distribution of economic benefits of globalization. While in the past, the central axes of great divergences between industrialized and developing countries were in the field of economy, now there is a growing concern that the globalization of higher education will also negatively affect the field of "knowledge and skills". In this context, the role of higher education is more important than ever, to meet the challenges of globalization (Sadlak, 2013).

Competition and Cooperation

Globalization has intensified competition, as evidenced by the growing number of international institutions, but competition has also led to the development of partnerships. Collaboration takes many forms, both in the engagement of public and private actors, but also of the local community in the life of institutions. Thus, employers' engagement in higher education is increasing through their involvement on external boards and by visiting committees, research contracts, or internship provisions.

Challenges are other types of partnerships that link a Higher Education Institution with other institutions at the local, regional, national, and international levels, to massively improve research, to enrich the educational offer (through joint degrees) by increasing institutional reputation and international achievements. Examples of this partnership strategy at the local level are some associations initiated by governments or institutional leaders in higher education, where many national research councils have also been involved in promoting larger research structures (EHEA, 2015, p.1).

METHODOLOGY

The Bologna Process reform analysis relies on the evaluation/development research methodology in education addressed by Mertens (2005), where evaluation is a research methodology used to demonstrate the usefulness or merit of a public reform or program. The evaluation form used in this research served to collect data on the ongoing internationalization challenge. The evaluation judges whether the education policy for education is being implemented and whether work is being done to achieve the goals that the education reform aims at. In this type of research, the evaluator participates in the development and implementation of educational policies and aims at the qualitative development of educational policies. Furthermore, the evaluator works in a political context and responds to the concerns of the people involved in the design and implementation of the reform which are: education policy-makers, education leaders, lecturers, and students. Research on the development of higher education to the Bologna process in universities aims to assess what are some of the

challenges that arise. Also, another aim is to examine the context under which the reform is implemented. Below are some of the questions of this research aimed to gather information about the actors involved in the implementation of the Bologna Process?

- What are the challenges and difficulties of implementing the Bologna reform?
- What are the main needs identified by rectors, professors, and students in response to the challenge of internationalization?
- What are some issues related to the internationalization of higher education in the country?

For the methodology, the study is based on the scheme proposed by Creswell (2012) for mixed methods (mixed methods approach). According to Creswell (2012), research through a framework of mixed methods is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and combining qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study to understand the issue under research. It is assumed that the use of both methods makes it possible to better understand the problem, compared to the use of one method. This approach is especially true for higher education problems, which are complex and the use of a single method is insufficient. Furthermore, using many sources of information (experts, students, policymakers, professors, reports), the purpose of this study is to provide an alternative to the way of analyzing problems in higher education in Albania.

The methods for data collection in this research are: analysis of official documentation, focus groups, and interviews/questionnaires.

The study was conducted in 3 main phases:

A. Qualitative documentary study and literature review

B. Qualitative study through interviews with 10 university rector's public and private. Also, a quantitative study through a semi-structured questioner with 600 students was used. The information obtained from which served to analyze and discuss the findings of the paper.

C. Qualitative study through focus groups with 50 lectures.

Documentation analysis is a well-known method in education, to understand the content and purpose of a public policy. Formal text analysis takes on particular importance for a longitudinal study to show the path of a strategy along with its implementation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Secondary data analysis is important because, firstly, it helps the researcher save the first time for data collection, which has been collected by other professionals before, and secondly, data obtained from official sources guarantee a high level of reliability and validity (Boslaugh, 2007). Secondary data are the result of the review of a wide literature on the contemporary development of higher education and especially on the Bologna Process, which is used as a theoretical foundation for this research. To achieve the purpose of the study, secondary data were used by direct observation, analysis of various articles; as well as the use of relevant literature resources. Also, statistical analyzes of secondary data on higher education in the country have been performed, collected from various sources, such as the Ministry of Education, INSTAT, World Bank, local and international institutions that have produced data on higher education in Albania (EURASHE, EUA, OECD, etc.).

The focus group is finding increasing application in educational research (Cohen et al., 2007). Focus group is a research strategy based on group interviews. Focus group as a method allows study participants to be analyzed in their context thus avoiding de contextualization (Bryman, 2004). Unlike the question and answer interview, the focus group uses interaction which provides more data on the views of the search participants than the interview that is dominated mostly by the researcher (Mertens, 2005). Moreover, the information coming from

the focus group is richer than that coming from a single individual. The participation of more people in the interview causes the material to be supplemented with opinions (Cohen et al., 2007). Participants may be of the same profession but not of the same opinion. So, the focus group is based on the discussion between small groups of individuals, with the presence of one or more mediators, of focusing on an argument that is required to be explored in-depth (Corrao, 2000). Group confrontation can bring out new, even more, complex aspects, which is not possible in an individual interview (Paçukaj, 2010).

Focus group helps participants determine the meaning of their actions. The defining characteristic of being a member of the focus group was teaching at the university. Focus groups were organized in Tirana and Durres, during May 2020, with lecturers. During the research, 5 focus groups consisting of 10 lecturers from public and non-public universities were conducted. The focus groups focused on recognizing the opinions, perceptions, and interests of the group members while the data were analyzed through thematic analysis and content analysis. The content analysis method helped to create a database with existing reports and studies on the issue, enabling data triangulation as well. This analysis, on the one hand, helped to formulate the main research questions of the study, on the other hand, was put in the function of the analysis of the study findings serving as a source of comparison and confrontation to these findings.

Interviewing is the most popular method of qualitative research and is used to discover the reasons for people's attitudes and opinions. Usually, interview questions are less structured than quantitative survey questions. In some cases, the interviews are even completely unstructured or take the form of conversations to get more information from the interviewee (Mertens, 2005). In the free interview, the applicant leaves great control to the interviewee for conducting the conversation. The goal is to get as much information as possible without interfering with the flow of the conversation. In this study, the interviews were conducted in the form of discussion based on a list of questions aimed at obtaining information on the development of the Bologna reform and its challenges. Through interviews, we tried to identify some of the challenges associated with academic attitudes in the implantation process and to draw conclusions for the future internationalization of higher education. The interviews were conducted with ten rectors responsible for the development and implementation of the reform in private and public universities in the country. After the first contact with these persons, a meeting was made possible for their realization in the offices of the rectors.

The questionnaire addressed to students consists of structured questions and aimed to measure the main expectations of students from the implementation of the Bologna Process in the institution where they study, the implementation of reform at the institution level, recognition of diplomas, international cooperation, student mobility in universities abroad place, providing services for students and placing the student at the center of the learning process, etc.

Such methods were used so that the findings were as complete and diverse as possible. More importance has been given to qualitative methods due to the nature of the problem in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following is an overview of what students, rectors, and focus groups with academic staff perceive in the way of implementing the Bologna Process in the country, how the challenges emerge from their point of view, how they can be overcome, and how they

would like to see the future, with the main focus on the internationalization of higher education.

Some of the main findings of the study are addressed below. They are structured according to the main challenges they think arise during the implementation of the Bologna Process, followed by their perceptions on future reforms.

Challenges to the internationalization of higher education institutions from rectors, academic staff, and student's perspective.

Internationalization remains a top priority for Higher Education Institutions (Crosier et al., 2007). The interviews provided rich information on issues related to the internationalization of higher education. Recognition of studies abroad as well as the promotion of staff mobility in Higher Education Institutions is probably the most important dimension in the internationalization of a strategy at the institutional level. In other words, in addition to specific issues, such as the organization of recognition procedures or the promotion of staff and student mobility, mobility needs to be reconsidered a key element in institutionalization policies for internationalization and all issues around it seek to be addressed. Analysis of the study to Focus groups highlighted many problems related to the implementation of the Bologna Process. The growing emphasis on the internationalization of higher education should be reflected in specific strategies and actions to promote student and staff mobility, to make significant progress in removing various barriers.

From an institutional point of view, awareness of the tools that facilitate mobility needs to be raised within the institutions (Lisbon Convention) and mobility levels can be improved through a combination of actions, such as determining the outcomes of improving the use of ECTS, quality assurance, Diploma Supplement, their international understanding, and providing financial support to students. However, mobility, as a period of study abroad during Bachelor studies remains a challenge, if not at the center of the institutional strategy for internationalization. Seen from this perspective, institutions are required to develop a strategy that defines the scope of their internationalization, orientation, and educational development, as well as research activities accordingly. This includes the identification of short-term objectives for full mobility as well as the types of cooperation that fit the general and specific needs of each HEIs. Mobility should be tailored to the mission and profile of each institution and should meet the individual educational goals of each student. Promotion mobility is identified as a challenge for both students and institutional leaders. While from a policy perspective there is a need to develop more precise definitions and measurements of mobility, to correct current shortcomings. One challenge remains to promote mobility by improving information and aligning national policies at the European level, such as visa requirements, promoting portability, pension provisions for researchers, study grants and student loans, etc.

Data show (Euridice, 2018) that Albania is an exporting country of students and the balance of mobility, which is one of the goals of the Bucharest Communication (2012) and the Mobility Strategy (2012), is in favor of outgoing students. The weighted average for EHEA is 1.09, while for Albania 0.10 incoming students to those leaving for students within EHEA. This shows that Albania is not an attractive country and talks a lot about the quality of higher education in the country.

After the implementation of the Bologna Process, Albania has had an increase in international mobility compared to other countries in the region, especially in the outgoing mobility, but there is no data on the total percentage of students with international experience. Although the number of Albanian students studying abroad has increased six-fold since 1999

and Albania is one of the leading countries in the Western Balkans in terms of the absolute number of students studying abroad, mobility through European programs has not been very successful. It is estimated that since 1999 about 25,000 students have studied abroad (UNESCO 2015) but only a few Master's program students have benefited from Erasmus Mundus mobility programs. In this perspective, the institutions of higher education in the country have lagged behind their counterparts in Eastern European countries in both staff mobility and research (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice 2015).

Student mobility and the provision of international programs in their language and culture is not offered in Albanian university. The findings of this issue show that 6 of the rectors has answered that their universities do not have this type of support service. Poor language skills of incoming students or national language policies restricting teaching in non-national languages or requiring national language administration exams appear to have reduced the number of incoming students. Also, limited funding for incoming students is considered to be a financial burden for the institution. Also, other economic and social requirements for incoming students, such as housing, etc., maybe some issues that affect this type of mobility in the country (Laze, 2020). In terms of discourse and formal aspects dealing with mobility, mainly social, the congruence between the Bologna system in Albania and the Bologna model in Europe is considerable.

Regarding the internationalization of higher education in Albania, referring to the findings of the rectors, the priority is to increase the academic mobility of academic staff and students, as well as participation in international higher education programs and scientific research. The rectors emphasize that building relations with other countries through participation in international higher education programs for academic exchange and building international cooperation partnership networks, would be a positive achievement of the Bologna process. They consider it very important to set up a strategy at the national level on these issues, although it should be noted that in recent years higher education institutions have adopted their internationalization strategies, but it is still unclear to concrete action. Most of them are short terms strategies. All these important issues of increasing academic mobility, participation in international programs, building relations with other countries, academic exchange, and building international cooperation partnership networks are considered by the rectors as the future challenges in the context of the Bologna Process. This situation is also reinforced by their answers, (42.9%) point out that a very important challenge related to internationalization remains the lack of joint programs with institutions in other countries, although at the department level some initiatives for joint programs are being planned mostly in the second cycle (Polytechnic University of Tirana and Agricultural University of Tirana). Respondents argue that joint programs are very necessary for the development of quality education, although, in terms of the implementation and development both in form and content, respondents share different thought, sometimes contradictory, opinions on how the Bologna process has influenced this issue.

Thus, the rectors say that the Bologna process has had positive developments because it has increased the opportunity for cooperation and enables good practices and quality professional development for both staff and students. As for the academic staff and students, it seems that their opinions are very controversial, letting us know that the Bologna Process does not understand the same at all institutions. According to the focus groups, the concrete benefits and real involvement of students in joint programs are still meager. On the one hand, they accept the Bologna reform, but on the other hand, this reform is not giving visible

qualitative results, as it is not properly understood by the implementers, highlighting the need for more commitment at the institutional level.

According to them, a space for the mobility of students and academic staff through joint programs with European universities would increase the scientific quality of national programs and make Albanian diplomas in line with the standards of the European Higher Education Area, and in turn, contribute to brain absorption.

From the interviews, the studies show that the Diploma Supplement was perceived as a valuable tool for international mobility or the international labor market locally, but this has taken on little importance. Although it now appears that there is wider use of the Diploma Supplement and the data represent a small step towards its implementation yet the implementation is not universal and it is clear that there are significant variations in the levels of its implementation. The findings by the rectors confirm that a nationwide process for the digitization of the diploma supplement has not yet begun.

One of the most important tools of the Bologna Process in promoting employment and especially cross-border employment is the recognition of qualifications. This expands the employment opportunities of students and graduates by offering them access to a pan-European labor market. Thus, to the important question of whether the institution follows the procedures for recognition of diplomas from other institutions, 2 rectors answered that there are such procedures for recognition of studies abroad, 2 others responded that there are no procedures for recognition of diplomas by other institutions, and in 1 case claims that there are procedures for recognition of diplomas by other institutions in the country while executives did not respond.

Recognition procedures are complicated. Most institutions do not seem to follow the principles of recognition procedures outlined in the Lisbon Convention. The duration of the recognition process is usually not fixed and the decision-making process is complex, in some cases non-transparent, and this is often complicated by administrative barriers. Sometimes more than one institution is responsible for evaluating diplomas and qualifications, while the final decision is another institution. This can lead to confusion and complicate the whole process. Thus, we can say that the recognition of study periods is still a challenge of the higher education system in the country that seeks to be addressed to be implemented.

Although it is constantly said that the student should be placed at the center of decision-making, the perceptions of academic staff largely correspond to the reality of implementing reforms in the higher education system in Albania, because the adaptation has been "mechanical" led by the Ministry of Education Science and Youth, a genuine debate with students.

The perception of academic staff shows that the Bologna reform is very difficult to implement. From the discussions analyzed, they stated that the international cooperation with foreign universities is satisfactory, while another significant part stated that it is somewhat good or weak. This shows once again the lack of clarity in the implementation of the reform, as well as the need for academic staff for a national office that coordinates aspects of the Bologna Process. The lack of such an office at the Higher Education Institutions in our country has led to little coordination or cooperation between institutions for the implementation of the Bologna Process, as well as the view of reform as a common issue. Although the development of a strategy for higher education at the national level is not the task of Higher Education Institutions, the lack of such offices has helped to lack a strategy for

the development of the process nationwide, where institutions would help for a more accurate reflection of the problems of the implementation of this process.

A large part of the academic staff evaluates their engagement in the process as active through their direct engagement in the activities of the institution in the implementation of the Bologna process but still, many do not understand the main values of this process or do not possess the necessary knowledge, making implementation difficult and slow. Some judge that the current strategy on internationalization is not appropriate, lacking a clear vision for sustainable quality education.

Regarding the fundamental changes that have taken place in the higher education system in the last 10 years, the most selected alternatives are diversification of institutions according to their mission; privatization of higher education, change of the management system of the HEI followed by the change of the research system. While with the upcoming challenges in the next 10 years, they highlight: strengthening institutions, internationalization, promoting mobility, connecting universities with the world of work and industry, and cooperation with other institutions. While some of the indicators that show why international cooperation is not at the right level are considered:

- i. Lack of infrastructure;
- ii. Professor reluctance due to language barriers and academic barriers;
- iii. Lack of transparency and communication from institutional management - bureaucracy;
- iv. Non-transparent selection of professors to represent the University abroad;
- v. Lack of stable relationships with professors from abroad.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an analysis of the problems encountered in the implementation of the Bologna process, as well as the most important dimensions of the challenge of internationalization of higher education, which the higher education system in the country is facing for the successful implementation of the Bologna Process.

The Bologna Process has shown how higher education reform can be implemented internationally. European experience confirms that, in an interdependent world, higher education reform at the regional, national and institutional levels is also required to be carried out internationally, while respecting the local context. Higher education and research are entering a new stage of development. Higher education has become a very complex system, requiring sufficient internal knowledge about its structures and functioning. Although the crucial role of higher education is recognized, it remains a task to seek appropriate policies and formulations to address issues including international and interregional perspectives that are of paramount importance. Regarding internationalization in higher education in Albania, the priority is to increase the academic mobility of academic staff and students, as well as participation in international higher education programs and research. Furthermore, this strategy emphasizes building relationships with other countries through participation in international higher education programs for academic exchange and building international cooperation partnership networks. The implementation of the Bologna System has affected important aspects of the higher education system in Albania, from higher education policies, research, and structural aspects in the organization of studies or the administration of higher education. The three key challenges considered for the future of higher education are: First, the challenge of strengthening the relationship between Higher Education Institutions and other actors in society. Secondly, expanding the debate with employers, students, parents, and

other actors, to increase confidence in the quality and relevance of institutional engagement. Third, institutions need to start reflecting on the impact of the existence of the European Higher Education Area and beyond.

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